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Master Of the Universe

A Fan Fiction by Snowqueens Icedragon

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Master of the Universe

Chapter 1

I scowl with frustration at myself in the mirror. Damn my hair, it just won't behave, and damn Rose for being ill and subjecting me to this ordeal. I have tried to brush my hair into submission but it's not toeing the line. I must learn not to sleep with it wet. I recite this five times as a mantra whilst I try, once more, with the brush. I give up. The only thing I can do is restrain it, tightly, in a pony tail and hope that I look reasonably presentable.

Rose is my roommate and she has chosen, okay, that's a bit unfair, because choice has had nothing to do with it, but she has the flu and as such cannot do the interview she's arranged with some mega industrialist for the student newspaper. So I have been volunteered. I have final exams to cram for, one essay to finish and I am supposed to be working this afternoon, but no - today - I have to head into downtown Seattle and meet the enigmatic CEO of Cullen Enterprise Holdings, Inc. Allegedly he's some exceptional tycoon who is a major benefactor of our University and his time is extraordinarily precious… much more precious than mine - and he's granted Rose an interview… a real coup she tells me… Damn her extra-curricular activities.

"Bella I'm sorry. It took me nine months to get this interview and it will take another six to reschedule, and you and I will both have graduated by then. As the editor I can't blow this out… Please." Rose begs me in her rasping, really sore throat voice…

I stare at her red-rimmed runny eyes, her bright pink nose…

"Of course, I'll go Rose. You should go back to bed. Would you like some paracetamol?"

"Yes please. Here are the questions and my minidisk recorder. Just press record here. Make notes, I'll transcribe it all."

"I know nothing about him." My voice is anxious.

"The questions will see you through… go… I don't want you to be late."

“Okay… I’m going… I have a long drive. Go back to bed, but please make sure you eat - I made you some soup to heat up later.” I stare at her fondly…. only for you Rose would I do this.

“I will. Good luck… and thanks Bella, you’re a life saver as usual.”

I smiled wryly at her and head out the door to our room.

I cannot believe I have let Rose talk me into this. But then Rose can talk anyone into anything. She’ll make an exceptional journalist. She’s articulate, strong, persuasive, argumentative… beautiful, and she’s my dearest, dearest friend. The roads are clear as I set off from Portland; it’s early and I don’t have to be in Seattle until two this afternoon. Fortunately she’s lent me her car. I’m not sure my old truck would be up for the journey. Well, it is the least she can do - I frown into the rearview mirror - but I have to say her sporty BMW Z4 is so much more fun to drive than my truck and the miles slip away as I put my foot down.

It’s cloudy, but at least it’s not raining as I make my way into the city. The Seattle traffic is heavy, but I have an hour to go and I’m feeling fairly confident that I should be able to find somewhere to park… Thank heavens for the Sat Nav on the Z4 otherwise I’d be royally screwed.

My destination is the headquarters of Mr Cullen’s global enterprise. It’s a huge thirty-storey office building, all curved glass and steel, an architect’s utilitarian fantasy with Cullen House written discreetly in steel over the glass front doors. It’s a quarter to two and I feel an immense sense of relief that I’m not late as I walk into the enormous, frankly intimidating, glass, steel and white sandstone, first floor foyer.

Behind the solid sandstone desk a very attractive blonde haired young woman smiles pleasantly at me. She’s wearing the sharpest charcoal suit jacket and white shirt I have ever seen… she looks immaculate.

“I’m here to see Mr Cullen. Isabella Swan for Rosalie Hale.”

“Excuse me one moment Miss Swan.” She arches her eyebrow slightly as I stand self-consciously in front of her. I am beginning to wish I had borrowed one of Rose’s jackets rather than wear my navy blue peacoat. I have made an effort and worn my one and only skirt. It’s brown, and I have sensible brown knee-length boots and a blue sweater. For me… this is smart. I tuck one of the escaped tendrils of my hair behind my ear as I pretend she doesn’t intimidate me.

“Miss Hale is expected, please sign in here Miss Swan. You’ll want the end lift on the right, press for the 30th floor.” She smiles kindly at me, amused no doubt as I sign in. She hands me a security pass that has VISITOR very firmly stamped on the front… personally I

think it's obvious that I'm just visiting, I don't fit in here at all… nothing changes, I inwardly sigh… I thank her and walk over to the lifts, past the two security men who are both far more smartly dressed than me in their well-cut black suits.

The lift whisks me with unseemly haste to the thirtieth floor. The doors silently fly open and I'm in another large foyer, again all glass, steel and white sandstone. In front of me there's another desk of sandstone and another young blond woman dressed impeccably in black and white, who rises to greet me.

"Miss Swan, could you wait here, please?" She points to a seated area of white leather chairs. Behind the leather chairs is a large glass-walled meeting room with an enormous dark wood table and twenty dark wood chairs around it, beyond that a floor-to-ceiling window with a view of the Seattle skyline, looking out through the city towards the Pacific Ocean. It's a stunning vista. I stand and admire it, momentarily distracted before I sit.

I fish the questions out of my satchel and go through them, inwardly cursing Rose for not providing me with a brief biography. I know nothing about this man I am about to interview. He could be 90, he could be in his 30s… My nerves are beginning to kick in - I am uncomfortable with this one-to-one stuff. I am much better in a group scenario… preferably not asking any questions… sitting somewhere in the back. Well, judging by the building - all clinical and modern - he's probably in his thirties… fit, tanned, blond, to match the rest of the personnel.

Another elegant, flawlessly dressed blond comes out of a large door to the right. What is it with all the immaculate blonds? It's like Stepford here… I take a deep breath and stand up.

"Miss Swan," the latest blond asks.

"Yes…"

"Mr Cullen will see you in a moment. May I take your jacket?"

"Oh please." I struggle out of my pea coat.

"Have you been offered any refreshment?"

"Err – no…" Oh dear, am I going to get Blond Number One into trouble?

She frowns and eyes the young woman at the desk.

"Would you like tea, coffee, water?"

"Glass of water would be lovely, thank you."

“Jessica, please fetch Miss Swan a glass of water.” She says sternly to the young woman at the desk. Jessica scoots up immediately and walks to a door on the other side of the foyer.

“My apologies Miss Swan, Jessica is our new intern. Please be seated. Mr Cullen will probably be another five minutes.”

Jessica returns with a large glass of iced water.

“Here you go Miss Swan.”

“Thank you.”

Blonde Number Two goes and sits at the sandstone desk at her station and they both continue their work.

Perhaps Mr Cullen insists on all his employees being blonde… is that legal? I’m wondering idly, when the office door opens and a tall, elegantly dressed, rather beautiful black man exits. I have definitely worn the wrong clothes. He turns and says through the door,

“Golf, definitely, Cullen.”

I don’t hear the reply. He turns, sees me and smiles kindly. Jessica has jumped up and called the lift.

“Good afternoon ladies,” he says as he departs through the sliding door.

“Mr Cullen will see you now, Miss Swan. Do go through,” Blonde Number Two says.

I stand rather shakily, collect my satchel, leave my water and make my way to the partially open door.

“You don’t need to knock – just go in,” she smiles at me, and I push open the door and stumble through, tripping over my own feet as usual and falling head first into the office.

Chapter 2

I am on my hands and knees in the doorway to Mr Cullen's office, and gentle hands are around me helping to pull me up. I am so embarrassed, damn my clumsiness. I have to steel myself to glance up. Holy Crow, he's so young…

"Miss Hale…" he extends a long-fingered hand to me, once I'm stood. "I'm Edward Cullen. Are you all right? Would you like to sit?"

He's so young… and attractive. Very attractive. Tall, dressed in a fine grey suit, white shirt and black tie with unruly bronze hair and intense, bright green eyes that regard me shrewdly.

"Err… actually," It takes a moment for me to find my voice, and I think my mouth has plopped open in astonishment. If this guy is over thirty then I'm a monkey's uncle… I extend my hand to him in a daze, and we shake. As our fingers touch I feel a strange current go through me. I withdraw my hand hastily, and I can feel myself blinking… rapidly, matching my heart rate.

"Miss Hale is err… indisposed, so she sent me. I hope you don't mind, Mr Cullen."

"And you are…?" His voice is warm, possibly amused but it's difficult to tell from his impassive expression. He looks mildly interested, but above all, polite.

"Isabella Swan. I'm studying English with Rose… err Rosalie… err Miss Hale at Washington State."

"I see," he says simply and I think I can see the ghost of a smile in his expression, but I'm not sure. "Would you like to sit?" He waves me towards a white leather buttoned L-shaped couch. The room is vast with an enormous modern dark wood desk beside the floor-to-ceiling windows. Everything is white, except on the wall by the door there's a succession of small square paintings, thirty-six of them arranged in a square…. they are exquisite, a series of mundane, forgotten objects, painted in such precise detail they look like photographs. Displayed together, they are breathtaking.

"A local artist. Trouton," he says when he catches my gaze.

"They're lovely. Raising the ordinary to extraordinary," I murmur, distracted, by him and by the paintings. He gazes at me intently.

"Yes Miss Swan," he replies softly.

Apart from the paintings, the rest of the room is pleasant enough, but it's quite cold, clean… clinical. I wonder if it truly reflects the personality of the Greek god who sinks gracefully into one of the white leather chairs opposite me. I am disturbed by where my thoughts are heading so I busy myself with finding the questions that Rose has given me and then setting up the mini-disc recorder. I am all fingers and thumbs, dropping it twice on the dark wood coffee table in front of me. Mr Cullen says nothing, as I become increasingly embarrassed and flustered. When I finally pluck up the courage to look at him he's watching me, one hand relaxed in his lap and the other cupping his chin and trailing his long index finger across his lips. I think he's trying to suppress a smile.

"Sorry," I stutter. "I'm not used to this."

"Take all the time you need Miss Swan," he says.

"Do you mind if I record your answers?"

"After you've taken so much trouble to set up the recorder… you ask me now?"

I flush. He's teasing me… I hope… I blink at him and I think he takes pity on me because he relents. "No, I don't mind."

"Did Rose… I mean Miss Hale explain what the interview was for?"

"Yes, your student newspaper *WSU Eyewitness*. To appear in the graduation issue, as I shall be conferring the degrees at this year's graduation ceremony."

Oh… this is news to me… and I'm temporarily pre-occupied with the thought that someone, not much older than me… okay maybe six years or so, and okay he's mega successful… but still - he's going to present me with my degree! I try and drag myself back to the task in hand.

"Good… well, I have some questions… Mr Cullen." I smooth a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"I thought you might…" he says, deadpan. He's teasing me again. I feel the heat in my cheeks and I pull myself up in an attempt to look taller and intimidating. I press the start button on the recorder and try for professional… I read the first of Rose's questions.

"You're very young to have amassed such an empire. To what do you owe your success?" I glance up at him.

He smiles ruefully at me but looks vaguely disappointed.

“Business is all about people, Miss Swan and I’m very good at judging people - I know how they tick, what makes them flourish, what weakens them, what inspires them, and how to incentivise them… I employ many, many good people and I reward them well. I believe that the road to success in any scheme is to make oneself master of that scheme and I work hard, very hard to do that. I make decisions based on logic and facts and I have good solid ideas and an exceptional team that can come up with good solid ideas – again, good people.

“Maybe you’re just lucky.” This isn’t on Rose’s list, but he’s so arrogant…

“I don’t subscribe to luck or chance, Miss Swan. The harder I work the more luck I seem to have. It really is all about having the right people on your team. I think it was Harvey Firestone who said ‘the growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.’”

“You sound like a control freak.” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

“Oh, I exercise control in all things Miss Swan,” he says, not a trace of humor in his smile. I look at him and he holds my gaze steadily, impassive, but my heartbeat quickens inexplicably and my face flushes again. Why does he have such an unnerving effect on me? His overwhelming good looks maybe? The way his eyes blaze at me?

He continues, “ Besides, immense power is acquired by assuring yourself in your secret reveries that you were born to control things…”

“Do you feel that you have immense power?” Control Freak.

“I employ over fifty thousand people Miss Swan. That gives me a certain… sense of responsibility. Power if you will. If I decide I’m no longer interested in the telecommunications business and sell up - twenty five thousand people would struggle to make their mortgage payments after a month or so…”

I think my mouth drops open. I am staggered by his lack of humility.

“Don’t you have a board to answer to?” I ask disgusted.

“I own my company – so I don’t have to answer to a board.” He raises an eyebrow at me… of course I would know this if I had done some research… But Holy Crow… he’s so arrogant… I change tack.

none;">“And do you have any interests outside of your work?”

“I have varied interests, Miss Swan.” A ghost of a smile touches his lips. “Very varied.” And for some reason I feel confounded and heated by his steady gaze... His eyes alight with some wicked thought...

“But if you work so hard what do you do to chill out?”

“Chill out?” He smiles a dazzling white-toothed, crooked smile at me. I stop breathing. He really is beautiful. No one should be this good looking. “Well, to chill out as you put it - I sail, I fly, various physical pursuits,” he shifts in his chair. “I’m a very wealthy man, Miss Swan and I have expensive and absorbing hobbies.”

I glance quickly at Rose’s questions, wanting to get off this subject,

“You invest in manufacturing… why specifically?” I ask. Why does he make me feel so uncomfortable?

“I like to build things, I like to know how things work, what makes things tick… how to construct and deconstruct… And I have a love of ships… what can I say…?”

“That sounds like your heart talking rather than logic and facts.”

His mouth quirks up at me and he stares at me appraisingly. “Possibly… though there are people I know who’d say I don’t have a heart.”

“Why would they say that?”

“Because they know me well,” his lip curls in a wry smile.

“Would your friends say that you are easy to get to know?” And I regret the question as soon as I say it… it’s not on Rose’s list…

“I’m a very private person, Miss Swan, and I’ll go a long way to protect my privacy. I don’t often give interviews…” he trails off.

“Why did you agree to do this interview?”

“Because I’m a benefactor of the university… and to all intents and purposes I couldn’t get Miss Hale off my back… she badgered and badgered my PR people, and I admire that kind of tenacity.”

I knew just how tenacious Rose could be… that’s why I sat here squirming uncomfortably, when I should be revising...

“You also invest in farming technologies… Why are you interested in this area?”

“We can’t eat money, Miss Swan, and there are too many people on this planet who don’t have enough to eat.”

"That sounds very philanthropic. Is that something you feel passionately about? Feeding the world's poor?"

He shrugs. "It's shrewd business," he murmurs, though I think he's being disingenuous. It doesn't make sense… feeding the world's poor… I can't see the financial benefits of this… only the virtue of the ideal… I glance at the next question confused by his attitude.

"Do you have a philosophy? If so, what is it?"

"I don't have a philosophy as such… maybe a guiding principle, Carnegie's: A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his own mind may take possession of anything else to which he is justly entitled. I'm very singular, driven. I like control… of myself and those around me."

"So you want to possess things…" You *are* a control freak.

"I want to deserve to possess them… but yes, bottom line… I do."

"You sound like the ultimate consumer."

"I am." He smiles, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes.

Again this is at odds with someone who wants to feed the world so I can't help but think that we are talking about something else… but I'm absolutely mystified as to what it is. I swallow hard… the temperature in the room feels like it's rising… or maybe it's just me. I'm nearly through all the questions. Surely Rose has enough material now. I glance at the next question.

"You were adopted… how far do you think that's shaped the way you are?"

Ooh… this is personal. I stare at him hoping I haven't offended him. He frowns at me slightly.

"I have no way of knowing."

My interest is piqued. "How old were you when you were adopted?"

"This is all a matter of public record Miss Swan." His tone is stern. I flush… yes of course… if I'd known I was doing the interview I would have done some research. I move on.

"You've had to sacrifice a family life for your work."

"That's not a question." He's terse.

“Sorry,” I squirm, and he’s made me feel like an errant child. “Have you had to sacrifice a family life for your work?” I try again.

“I have a family, I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents… I’m not interested in extending my family beyond that.”

“Are you gay, Mr Cullen?”

I hear his sharp intake of breath… and I cringe inwardly…crap… why didn’t I employ some kind of filter before I read this straight out…? How can I tell him I’m just reading the questions? Damn Rose and her curiosity.

“No Isabella, I’m not,” and he raises his eyebrows, a cool gleam in his eyes - he does not look pleased.

“I apologise… it’s err… written here…” It’s the first time he’s said my name and my heartbeat has accelerated and I can feel my cheeks heating up again… Nervously I tuck my hair behind my ear as its worked its way loose.

He cocks his head to one side.

“These aren’t your questions?”

“Err… no… Rose… Miss Hale, she’s compiled the questions.”

“Are you colleagues on the student paper?”

Oh crap… I have nothing to do with the student paper. It’s her extra-curricular activity, not mine. I can feel my face heating further.

“No… she’s my room-mate.”

He rubs his chin in quiet deliberation, his green eyes appraising me.

“Did you volunteer to do this interview?” he asks quietly.

Hang on… who’s supposed to be interviewing who…? His eyes burn into me and I am compelled to answer truthfully.

“I was drafted… She’s not well,” I say weakly, by way of explanation.

“That explains a great deal,” he says softly.

There's a knock at the door and Blond Number Two enters. "Mr Cullen, forgive me for interrupting but your next meeting is in two minutes."

"We're not finished here Angela. Please cancel my next meeting."

Angela hesitates, staring at him… she's momentarily lost. He raises his eyebrows at her… She flushes.

"Very well Mr Cullen," she mutters and then exits. He frowns and then turns his attention back to me.

"Where were we Miss Swan?" Oh we're back to Miss Swan now…

"Err… please don't let me keep you from anything…"

"I want to know about you Miss Swan, I think that's only fair…" His green eyes alight with curiosity. Oh crap… where's he going with this…? He places his elbows on the arms of the chair and steeples his fingers in front of his mouth. His mouth is very distracting…

"There's not much to know," I say, flushing again.

"What are your plans after you graduate?"

I shrug, flustered. *Come to Seattle with Rose, find a place, find a job… I haven't really thought beyond my finals.*

"I haven't made any plans Mr Cullen, I just need to get through my final exams." - Which I should be studying for now, rather than sitting in your palatial, swanky, sterile office, feeling uncomfortable under your penetrating gaze.

"We run an excellent internship program here…" he says quietly.

I raise my eyebrows in surprise. Is he offering me a job…?

"Oh… I'll bear that in mind," I murmur, completely thrown. "Though I'm not sure I'd fit in here…" Crap – I am musing out loud again…

"Why do you say that?" He cocks his head to one side, intrigued, a hint of his crooked smile plays on his lips.

"Well it's obvious isn't it?" *I'm uncoordinated, scruffy… and I'm not blond.*

"Not to me…" he murmurs and he gazes at me intently, all humor gone and strange muscles deep in my belly clench suddenly. I tear my eyes away from his scrutiny… and

stare down at my knotted fingers. What's going on…? I have to go… now. I lean forward to retrieve the recorder.

"Would you like me to show you round?" he asks.

"I'm sure you're far too busy Mr Cullen, and I do have a long drive."

"You're driving back to Portland?" He sounds surprised, anxious suddenly. He glances out of the window and it's begun to rain. "Well you'd better drive carefully." His tone is stern, authoritative. Why should he care? "Did you get everything you need?" he adds.

"Yes sir..." I reply and I pack the recorder into my satchel. His eyes narrow slightly... speculatively.

"Thank you for letting me interview you Mr Cullen."

"The pleasure's been all mine."

As I rise, he stands and holds his hand out to me.

"Until we meet again Miss Swan." And it sounds like a challenge, or a threat. I shake his hand briefly, feeling again the odd current between us… I conclude it must just be my nerves.

"Mr Cullen." I nod at him. He moves gracefully to the door and opens it wide.

"I'm just ensuring you make it through the door, Miss Swan." Obviously he's referring to my less-than-elegant entry into his office earlier.

I flush.

"Well, that's very considerate," I snap at him and he smiles. I'm glad you find me amusing, I glower inwardly… I walk into the foyer and he follows. Angela and Jessica both look up in surprise.

"Did you have a coat?" He asks.

"Yes."

Jessica leaps up and retrieves my pea coat which Cullen takes from her before she can hand it to me. He holds it up and feeling beyond self-conscious I put my arms into it, and he puts his hands very briefly on my shoulders as he pulls it over me. I gasp at the contact. If he notices, he gives nothing away. He presses the lift door and we stand there for a beat, awkwardly on my part… self-possessed and cool on his. The doors open and I hurry in…

desperate to escape… I really need to get out of here. I turn to look at him and he's leaning against the doorway beside the lift, one hand on the wall… he really is very, very good looking… it's distracting. His burning green eyes gaze at me…

"Isabella…" he says as a farewell.

"Edward…" I reply and mercifully the doors close.

Chapter 3

My heart is pounding. When the lift arrives on the first floor, I scramble out as soon as the doors open, stumbling once, fortunately not sprawling on to the floor. I head for the wide glass doors and then I'm in the bracing, cleansing, damp air of Seattle. I raise my face to welcome the cool refreshing rain… closing my eyes, trying to recover what's left of my equilibrium, taking a huge purifying breath. No man has ever affected me the way Edward Cullen has… and I don't know why. Is it his good looks? His civility? Wealth? Power? I just don't understand my irrational reaction. I breathe an enormous sigh of relief. What in heaven's name was that all about? I lean against one of the steel pillars of the building… gathering my thoughts, calming down. I shake my head, feeling more myself as my heart steadies to its regular rhythm, and I'm breathing normally again… I head for the car.

As I leave the city limits behind me I begin to feel foolish and embarrassed. Surely I'm over-reacting to something that I'm imagining…. Okay, so he's very attractive, confident, commanding, so at ease with himself. But on the flip side he's also arrogant, and in spite of his impeccable manners, he's very autocratic, and cold… well on the surface, and an involuntary shiver runs down my spine. He may be arrogant but then he's accomplished so much at such a young age, and I can tell he doesn't suffer fools gladly, why should he? I am irritated again that Rose didn't give me a brief biography.

I think about the interview itself. I am truly perplexed as to what makes someone so driven to such success. And some of his answers were so cryptic, like he had some hidden agenda. And some of Rose's questions – ugh – the adoption, and asking him if he was gay, I can't believe I said that - I'm mortified anew – I know that every time I think of this in the future I will cringe with embarrassment… damn Rosalie Hale.

I check the speedometer – I am driving more cautiously than I would on any other occasion and I know it's the memory of two penetrating green eyes gazing at me, and his stern voice telling me to drive carefully. I shake my head, he's more like a man double his age.

Forget it Bella - I scold myself. I decide that all in all it's been a very interesting experience but that I shouldn't dwell on it. *Put it behind you.* After all, I never have to see him again. I'm immediately cheered by the thought, so I switch on the MP3 player, sit back, turn the indie rock music up loud and head down the I-5, pushing down on the accelerator… knowing that I can drive as fast as I want.

As I park outside our apartment I know Rose is going to want a blow-by-blow account and she can be tenacious. Well, at least she has the mini disc. Hopefully I won't have to elaborate much beyond that. We live in a gated community of lovely duplex apartments. I'm lucky – Rose's parents have bought it for her, and I help with the rent. It's been home for the last four years.

“Bella, you’re back.” Rose is sitting in our living area surrounded by books. She’s been studying for finals, though she’s still dressed in her pink flannel pajamas that are decorated with little pink rabbits. These pj’s she reserves for the aftermath of breaking up with boyfriends, illnesses and general moody depression. She bounds up to me and hugs me hard. “I was beginning to worry. I expected you back sooner.”

“Sorry – the interview went on longer than anticipated.” I hand her the mini disc.

“Bella, thanks so much for doing this. I owe you, I know. How was it? What was he like?” Oh no here we go… the Rosalie Hale Inquisition.

I struggle to answer her question. “I’m glad it’s over and I don’t have to see him again. He was… rather intimidating. You know, he’s very focused, intense even and young, really young.”

She gazes innocently at me.

“Yes Rose why didn’t you give me a biography? He made me feel such an idiot for not doing any basic research.” I frown at her. “Mostly he was courteous, formal, slightly stuffy… like he’s old before his time… he doesn’t talk like a twenty something man. How old is he anyway?”

“He’s twenty-seven. Gee Bella I’m sorry. I didn’t think. Let me have the mini-disc and I’ll get on to it.”

“You look better. Did you eat your soup?”

“Yes I did, and it was delicious as usual, and I’m feeling better.” She smiles at me in gratitude.

“Anyway I have to run. I can still make my shift at Newton’s.”

“Bella, you’ll be exhausted...”

“I’m fine. I’ll see you later.”

Since I started at WSU I have worked at Newton’s. It is the largest camping warehouse in the Portland area, so over the four years I’ve lived here I’ve come to know a bit about camping… though I’ve never been keen myself. I’m much more of a curl up with a book, in a comfy chair, in front of a fire, kind of girl. I am glad I make my shift – it gives me something to focus on that isn’t Edward Cullen. We’re busy. It’s the start of the summer

season and we have the first wave of tourists to attend to. Mrs Newton is pleased to see me. "Bella, I thought you weren't going to make it today."

"My appointment didn't take as along as predicted. I can do a couple of hours."

"Well, I'm pleased to see you. It's busy."

She sends me out to the stock room to start re-stocking shelves and I'm soon absorbed in the task.

Rosalie is busy typing on her laptop wearing headphones when I return at eight-thirty. Her nose is still pink, but she has her teeth into a story so she's off, typing furiously. I'm thoroughly drained and I slump on to the couch, thinking of the essay I have to finish and all the revision I had hoped to do today.

"You've got some good stuff here Bella, well done. I can't believe you didn't take him up on his offer to show you round… He obviously wanted to spend more time with you." She gives me a fleeting quizzical look.

I flush and my heart rate inexplicably increases. That wasn't the reason surely? He just wanted to show me round so that I could see that he was Lord of all he surveyed. I realise I am biting my lip and hope that Rose doesn't notice. She seems absorbed in her transcription.

"I hear what you mean about formal. Did you take any notes?" she asks.

"Umm… no, I didn't."

"That's fine… I can make a good article with this. Shame I don't have some original photos. He's a good looking son of a bitch isn't he?"

I flush. "Yeah I suppose so."

"Oh come on Bella – even you can't be immune to his looks." She arches a perfect eyebrow at me.

I decide to distract her with flattery… always a good ploy. "You probably would have got a lot more out of him."

"I think you did pretty good, Bells. Come on, he practically offered you a job. Given that I foisted this on you at the last minute… you did really well." She glances up at me

speculatively and I quickly escape from the couch into the kitchen to make myself a sandwich.

“So what did you really think of him?” She's so inquisitive. Why can’t she just let this go?

“He’s very driven, controlling, arrogant… scary really… but very charismatic… I can understand the fascination,” I say truthfully, hoping it will shut her up once and for all.

“You… fascinated by a man… that’s a first,” she snorts.

I busy myself in the kitchen so she can’t see my face.

“Why did you want to know if he was gay? And, incidentally, I was mortified asking that question.”

“Well, whenever he’s in the society pages of the papers he’s never got a date.”

“Well, it was embarrassing… the whole thing was embarrassing and I’m glad I’ll never have to lay eyes on him again.”

“Oh Bella, it can’t have been that bad. I think he sounds quite taken with you.”

“Would you like a sandwich?”

“Yes, please.”

We talk no more of Edward Cullen… thank heavens and I’m able to sit at the dining table with Rose and finish my essay on *Tess of the D’Urbervilles.* Damn but that woman was in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong century… By the time I’ve finished it’s midnight. Rose has wisely gone to bed and I make my way to my room, exhausted, but pleased that I’ve accomplished so much for a Monday. As I curl up in my bed I close my eyes and I’m instantly asleep. That night, I dream of green eyes, dark places and bleak white cold floors…

For the rest of the week I throw myself very enthusiastically into my revision and work at the Newton’s place. Rose is readying her last edition of *Eyewitness* before she has to relinquish it to the new editor and is also studying. By Wednesday she’s much better so I don’t have to endure the sight of her pink flannel too many rabbits PJs. I call my Mom in Florida, to check on her, but also so that she can wish me luck for my final exams. She proceeds to tell me about her latest venture into candle making… my mother is all about new business ventures. Basically, she’s bored at home and wants something to occupy her time, but she has the attention span of a goldfish… it will be something new next week. She

worries me… I hope she's not mortgaged the house to finance this latest scheme. I hope Phil, her relatively new, young husband is keeping an eye on her, now that I'm no longer there.

"How are things with you, Bella?"

For a moment I hesitate…. and I have her full attention. "I'm fine."

"Bella? Have you met someone?" *Wow… how does she do that?* The excitement in her voice is palpable.

"No Mom… it's nothing… you'll be the first to know if I do."

"Bella, you really need to get out more honey… you worry me."

"Mom, I'm fine. How's Phil?" As ever distraction is always the best policy.

After my conversation I call Charlie, my Dad. That's a brief conversation… well not so much a conversation but a series of one-sided grunts in response to my gentle coaxing… Charlie is not a talker. But he's still alive, still watching sports on TV and still fishing… all is well with him.

On Friday night Rose and I are debating what to do with our evening. We want a night off from revision and student newspapers... the doorbell rings. Standing at our door is my good friend Jake with a bottle of champagne.

"Wow, Jake! Great to see you…" I give him a quick hug. "Come in."

I've known Jake for years. We've grown up together but only for two weeks at a time every summer since I was two years old; his dad and Charlie are the best of buddies… Charlie dealing with the aftermath of his divorce, Jake's dad a widower. We've made mud pies, scraped our knees and fought evil together as kids… Jake always brought out the tomboy in me. I love him dearly, but as a friend. I am so proud of him. He's the first in his family to go to University and he's studying engineering. He's so bright – but his real passion is photography… he has a real eye for a great picture.

"I have news," he grins a big white-toothed smile at me, his dark eyes twinkling.

"Don't tell me, you've managed not to get kicked out for another week," I tease him and he scowls playfully at me.

"The Portland Gallery is going to exhibit my photos from next month."

"Oh Jake! That's amazing – congratulations!" I am so delighted for him - I hug him again.

"Way to go Jake..! I could put this in the newspaper. Nothing like a late editorial change on a Friday evening," Rose grins at him.

"Well, let's celebrate. I want you to come to the opening…" Jake looks intently at me. I flush. "Both of you, of course…" he adds.

We are good friends, but I know, deep down inside that he'd like to be more. He's cute – hot even – my oldest friend, who knows me so well… but he's just not for me. Rosalie often teases me that I'm missing the need-a-boyfriend gene, but the truth is – I just haven't met anyone who… well… who I'm attracted to. In my heart I'm hoping for trembling knees, heart in your mouth, butterflies in my belly… sleepless nights. Sometimes I wonder if there's something wrong with me. Perhaps I've spent too long in the company of my literary romantic heroes and consequently my ideals and expectations are far too high. But I know, in reality, nobody's ever made me feel like that… *except very recently… NO!…*an unwelcome still small voice whispers in my sub-conscious. I banish the thought immediately. I am not going there – not after the painful interview. Yes, I have dreamt about him most nights… but that's just to process the awful interview out of my system… surely?

I watch Jake as he's opening the bottle of champagne. He's in jeans and a t-shirt… tall, all shoulders and muscles, bronzed skin, dark hair and burning dark eyes. Yes, Jake's pretty hot, but I think he's finally getting the message – we are just friends. It is so easy to be in his company, especially when he's as happy as he is today.

Saturday at the store is a nightmare. We are besieged with tourists. Mr and Mrs Newton, me, and the two other part-timers are rushed off our feet. There's a lull at lunchtime and Mrs Newton asks me to check on some orders whilst I'm sitting behind the counter at the till. I'm engrossed in the task, checking catalogue numbers against the items we need and what's been ordered. The Newtons haven't yet caught up with technology so they still run a paper ordering system. The shop is quiet for the first time all day and I can give the task my full attention. Then… for some reason I glance up. And find myself locked into the bold green gaze of Edward Cullen, who's standing at the counter, staring at me intently.

Chapter 4

“Miss Swan. What a pleasant surprise.” He stares at me, his gaze unwavering and intense.

Holy Crow… What the hell is he doing here? Looking all tousled hair and outdoorsy in a grey chunky knit sweater, tight jeans, and walking boots. I think my mouth has popped open and I’m having difficulty locating my brain and my voice, which have disengaged from the rest of my body.

“Mr. Cullen,” I whisper, because that’s all I can manage.

There is a ghost of a smile on his face and his eyes are alight with humor, as if he’s enjoying some private joke.

“I was in the area,’” he says quietly by way of explanation. “I’m hiking. I need a few things. It’s a pleasure to see you again, Miss Swan.” His voice is warm and husky, like dark melted chocolate fudge caramel… or something. I shake my head slightly. My heart is pounding a frantic tattoo and for some reason I’m blushing furiously under his steady scrutiny. I am so thrown by seeing him standing before me. My memory of him does not do him justice – he’s not good-looking, he’s the epitome of male beauty, dazzling, and he’s here, here in Newton’s Camping Paradise. Go figure…

Finally, my cognitive function is restored and reconnected with the rest of my body.

“Bella, my name’s Bella.” I mutter quietly. “What can I help you with, Mr. Cullen?”

He smiles, and again it’s like he’s privy to some big secret. It is so disconcerting.

I take a deep breath and put on my professional, I’ve-worked-in-this-camping-shop-for-years façade. I can do this.

“Well, a map of the local area for starters,” he murmurs.

Okay, I know where those are. I try for nonchalance as I move around the counter, but really I’m concentrating so hard on not falling over my own feet, my legs the consistency of Jell-O. I’m aware that I’m wearing my best jeans, and I’m inappropriately pleased that I decided to wear them this morning.

“The maps are over here. Follow me,” I say too brightly.

“Lead the way,” he murmurs, gesturing with his long fingered, beautifully manicured hand.

With my heart practically strangling me, because it's in my throat trying to escape from my mouth, I head down one of the aisles to the map section. *Why is he here, here at Newton's?* And from a very tiny, underused part of my brain, probably located at the base of my medulla oblongata, comes the thought: *He's here to see you.* No way! I dismiss it immediately. Why would this beautiful, powerful, urbane man want to see me? The idea is utterly preposterous and I kick it out of my head.

"Whereabouts were you thinking of hiking?" My voice is slightly too high, like I've got my finger trapped in a door or something.

"Just somewhere picturesque and quiet in the surrounding neighborhood." He waves his hand vaguely. "I was visiting the university farming division. I am funding some research there in crop rotation and soil science."

See… not here to see you at all. That mean part of my brain, loud and proud, in the frontal lobe of my cerebrum, sneers at me. I flush as I think of my foolishness.

"Is this all part of your feed-the-world plan?"

"Something like that," he acknowledges and his lips quirk up in a half smile.

"Well, these maps in this section here, are the local area." I point to our map display. Part of me can't help feeling that he should have some kind of fancy GPS tracking device for all this sort of stuff. His fingers trail through the map display and for some inexplicable reason, I have to look away.

"This is the one… I think." He plucks one out and hands it to me. It's a local map that shows the Williamette Stone State Heritage Site.

"This trail is quite touristy," I offer by way of a warning.

"Hmmm… I'd like something more private," he says, and he's gazing at me, green eyes concentrating hard. I flush. Why the hell does he have this effect on me? I feel like I'm fourteen years old… Gauche, always out of place.

"Here, this trail is more secluded. It's north of the Williamette, but it's still the Forest Park." I hand him another map, scrabbling around for my equilibrium. Our fingers touch very briefly and the current is there, sparking through me. I gasp involuntarily as I feel it all the way to somewhere dark and unexplored deep in my belly.

"Have you been?" he asks.

I shake me head, because I can't talk again. I'm on shifting tectonic plates. *Try and be cool Bella,* my tortured sub-conscious begs.

“I think we both know that walking is not my thing, Mr. Cullen.” I cannot look him in the eye, he is just too glorious to behold.

“What is your thing, Isabella?” he asks softly. That secret smile is back.

“Books.” I squeeze the word out, and inside, that strange place in my medulla oblongata is firing synaptic impulses at me, screaming *You! You are my thing!* I slap it down instantaneously, mortified that my psyche is having ideas above its station.

“What kind of books?” He cocks his head to one side. *Why is he so interested?*

“Oh, you know, the usual… The classics… Mainly British literature.”

And he rubs his chin with his long index finger and his thumb as he contemplates my answer. Or he’s just very bored and trying to hide it.

“Is there anything else you need?” I have to get off this subject – his hands on his face are so beguiling.

“Well… I don’t know. What would you recommend?”

“Pants,” I reply, and I know I’m no longer screening what’s coming out of my mouth.

He raises an eyebrow at me. Amused… again.

“Denim is no good for hiking,” I hastily explain. “If your jeans get wet they’re heavy, don’t dry, and they chafe… And you’ll lose body heat.” As soon as I say the word "body," I can feel the color in my cheeks rising again.

“Well, I wouldn’t want any chafing,” he murmurs dryly. “I’d better get some pants. What would you recommend?”

“Err… you want something lightweight and breathable.”

“Okay. Lead on, Miss Swan.”

Oh no… I had not bargained for this… “ The clothing section is this way.” I practically whimper.

What follows has to be the most uncomfortable experience in my camping sales career, the nadir of my time at Newton’s. I have captured a Greek God in our changing rooms and I’m handing him lightweight walking trousers. How did this happen? By the time he’s chosen a pair that are navy blue – *How do I look in these? I’ll wear them now Miss Swan,* I am the color of the communist manifesto.

“Do you need anything else?” I squeak.

He ignores my question. “How’s the article coming on?”

He’s asked me a normal question, away from all the innuendo and confusing double talk, and the changing of the pants. A question I can answer. I grasp it with two hands tightly like a life-raft - going for honesty.

“I’m not writing it. Rosalie, Miss Hale, my roommate, she’s the writer - and she’s very happy with it. She’s the editor of the magazine, and of course she was devastated that she couldn’t do the interview in person.” I feel like I’ve come up for air. A normal conversation. “Her only concern is that she doesn’t have any original photographs of you.”

He raises an eyebrow at me.

“What sort of photographs does she want?”

Okay… I hadn’t factored on this response. I shake my head, because I just don’t know.

“Well, I intend to be in the area tomorrow, perhaps…” he trails off.

“You’d be willing to attend a photo shoot?” My voice is squeaky again. Rose will be in seventh heaven if I can pull this off. *And you might see him again tomorrow,* the dark place at the base of my brain whispers seductively at me. I dismiss the thought. Of all the silly, ridiculous…

“I think Rose would be delighted, if I can find a photographer.” I’m so pleased that I unconsciously smile at him, broadly.

His lips part slightly, like he’s taking a sharp intake of breath and he blinks at me, looking lost for a fraction of a second, and the earth shifts slightly on its axis. The tectonic plates sliding into a new position.

Oh my… Edward Cullen’s lost look.

“Let me know… If you need me tomorrow.” He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out his wallet.

“Here’s my card. It has my cell phone number on it. You’ll need to call before ten in the morning.”

“Okay.” I grin up at him. Rose is going to so thrilled.

“BELLA!”

Mike Newton has appeared out of the ether at the end of the aisle. He's the Newton's son, home from Princeton. It's such a surprise to see him.

"Err… excuse me for a moment, Mr. Cullen." He frowns as I turn away from him.

Mike has been a good buddy, someone I see intermittently when he's home from college, and in this strange moment that I'm having with the rich, powerful, awesomely off-the-scale attractive, control freak Cullen, it's great to see someone who's normal. He hugs me hard. Surprisingly hard.

"Bella! Hi, it's so good to see you," he says enthusiastically.

"Hello Mike. How are you? Are you home for your mom's birthday?"

"Yep. You're looking well Bells, really well." He frowns slightly, examining me.

He releases me, but keeps a possessive arm draped over my shoulder. And I shuffle, embarrassed, from foot to foot. Mike has always been over-familiar, but it's good to see him. I glance up at Edward Cullen and he's watching us like a hawk, his green eyes hooded, speculative, his mouth in a hard, impassive line. He's changed from the weirdly attentive customer to someone else. Someone cold and distant.

"Mike, I'm with a customer. Someone you should meet," I say to try and diffuse the antagonistic look in Cullen's eyes. I drag Mike over to meet him. "Can I introduce you to Edward Cullen?"

Mike and Edward eye each other up and the atmosphere is suddenly arctic.

"Err… Mike, this is Edward Cullen. Mr. Cullen, this is Mike Newton. His parents own the place." For some irrational reason, I feel I have to explain a bit more. "I've known Mike ever since I began working here, though we don't see each other often. Mike's back from Princeton where he's studying business administration." I am babbling. Stop now!

"Mr. Newton." Edward holds his hand out, his look unreadable.

"Cullen." Mike returns his handshake. "Wait up… not *the* Edward Cullen, of Cullen Holdings?" Mike goes from surly to awe in less than a nanosecond.

Edward smiles politely at him, but his smile doesn't reach his eyes.

"Wow, is there anything I can get you?"

"Isabella has it covered, Mr. Newton. She's been very attentive." His expression is impassive, cool, but his words… It's like he's saying something else. It's baffling.

“Cool,” Mike responds. “Catch you later, Bells.”

“Okay Mike.” I watch him leave for the stockroom. “Is there anything else you need, Mr. Cullen?”

“No, just the map and the pants.”

I take a deep breath and head for the till. I’m aware that I have managed to stay upright the entire time. Mentally, I award myself a small pat on the back. Nearly there. I ring up the map and the trousers.

“That will be fifty-three dollars, please.”

I glance up at him and I wish I hadn’t. He’s watching me so closely. Green eyes intense and blazing. It’s unnerving.

“Would you like a bag for your jeans and the map?” I ask as I take his credit card.

“No thanks, Isabella.” His tongue caresses my name, and once again my heart is frantic and I can hardly breathe. “So you’ll call me if you want me to do the photo shoot?”

I nod, because I have been rendered speechless again. I give him back his card.

“Good. Until tomorrow, maybe Miss Swan. Oh, and Isabella? I’m glad Miss Hale couldn’t do the interview.” He turns and strides purposefully out of the shop, his jeans slung over his shoulder, leaving me a quivering mass of raging female hormones. It takes several minutes of staring at the closed door, through which he’s just left, for me to return to planet Earth.

Okay… I like him. There, I’ve admitted it to myself. I cannot hide from my feelings anymore. This was what was so confusing, what I didn’t understand, because I’ve never felt like this before. I find him attractive… very attractive. It’s a lost cause, I know, and I sigh with bittersweet regret. But I can admire him from afar, surely. No harm will come of that. And, if I can find a photographer, I can do some serious admiring tomorrow. I bite my lip in anticipation and find myself grinning like a schoolgirl. Now I need to phone Rose… and find a photographer. Hmm…

Chapter 5

Rose is ecstatic. “But what was he doing at Newton’s?” I have called her on my cell, hidden in the depths of the stock room, at the back of the shop.

“Oh, he was in the area, going hiking.” I talk quietly, trying to keep my voice casual.

“I think this is one huge coincidence Bella. Perhaps he was there to see you,” Rose speculates excitedly.

My heart lurches at the prospect but it’s a short-lived joy. The dull reality is that he’s here on business. The realization is disappointing. “He was visiting the farming division of WSU. He’s funding some research.”

“Oh yes, he’s given the department a $2.5 million grant.”

Wow.

“How do you know this?”

“Bella, I’m a journalist… and I’ve written a profile on this guy. It’s my job to know this.”

“Okay, Carla Bernstein, keep your hair on. So do you want the photos?”

“Of course I do. The question is, where to do them?”

“We’ll need to ask him. He says he’s staying in the area this evening.”

“Can you contact him?”

“He gave me his cell phone number.”

Rose gasps audibly. “The richest, most elusive, most enigmatic bachelor in Washington State gave you his cell phone number.”

“Err… yes.”

“Bella, he likes you. No doubt about it,” she breathes down the phone.

"Rose, he's just trying to be nice." And as I say the words, I know they're not true. Edward Cullen doesn't do *nice* per se. He does polite. A small quiet voice whispers *perhaps Rose is right*. My scalp prickles at the idea that maybe, just maybe, he might like me… After all, he did say he was glad that Rose didn't do the interview. I hug myself with quiet glee, rocking from side to side, allowing myself a brief moment where I entertain the possibility that he might like me. Rose brings me back to the now.

"I don't know who we'll get to shoot the photos. Eric, our regular photographer can't do it – he's home in Idaho Falls for the weekend. He'll be pissed that he blew the opportunity to photograph one of America's leading entrepreneurs."

"Hmmm… What about Jacob?"

"Great idea. You ask him. He'll do anything for you. Then call Cullen and ask him where he wants us." Rose is irritatingly cavalier about Jake.

"I think you should call him."

"Who, Jacob?"

"No, Cullen."

"Bella, you're the one with the relationship…"

"Relationship!" I squeak at her, my voice rising several octaves. "I barely know the guy."

"At least you've met him," she says, a little bitterly. "And it looks like he wants to know you better, Bella. Call him," she snaps at me and hangs up. She is so bossy sometimes. I frown at the phone and stick my tongue out at it.

I am leaving a message for Jake as Mike comes into the stock room looking for more walking socks.

"It's busy out there Bella," he says, not unkindly, referring to the shop floor.

"Yeah, um sorry," I mutter. I go to leave.

"So how do you know Edward Cullen?" Mike stops me, his voice oozing curiosity.

"I had to interview him for *Eyewitness.* Rose wasn't well," I shrug, trying for casual again.

"Edward Cullen, in Newton's… go figure." Mike is enthusing. "So what are you doing this evening? Do you want to grab a drink or something?" Whenever he's home he asks me out, and I always say no. It's like a ritual. I've never thought it was a good idea to date the

boss's son. Besides, Mike is cute in a wholesome all-American boy-next-door kind of way, he's just not a literary hero by any stretch of the imagination. *Is Cullen?* My subconscious asks me with a figurative raised eyebrow. I slap it down.

"Don't you have a family dinner or something for your Mom?"

"That's tomorrow."

"Maybe some other time, Mike. I need to revise tonight. I have my finals next week."

"Bella, one of these days you'll say yes," he says quietly, smiling at me. I head quickly out to the shop floor.

"But I do places, not people Bella."

"Please Jake?" I beg, pacing the living area of our apartment and staring out of the window at the fading evening light.

"Give me that phone." Rose grabs the handset from me, tossing her silken blond hair over her shoulder.

"Listen here, Jacob Black, if you want *Eyewitness* to cover the opening of your show, you will do this shoot for us tomorrow, capiche?"

Rose is awesomely tough.

"Good. Bella will call back with details of the location and call time. See you tomorrow." She snaps my cell phone shut. "Sorted. All we need now is where and when. Call him." She holds the phone out to me and I feel physically sick. "Call Cullen now!" I scowl at her and reach into my back pocket for his business card. I take a deep steadying breath and with shaking fingers I dial the number.

He answers on the second ring. His tone clipped, calm, cold. "Cullen."

"Err… Mr Cullen, it's Isabella Swan." I don't recognize my own voice I'm so nervous. There's a brief pause and inside I'm quaking.

"Miss Swan. How nice to hear from you." His voice has changed. He's surprised I think… and he sounds so… warm,*seductive,* even over the phone. My breath hitches and I flush. I'm conscious that Rosalie Hale is staring at me, her mouth open, so I walk quickly into the kitchen to avoid her unwanted scrutiny.

"Err…we would like to go ahead with the photo shoot for the *Eyewitness* piece." *Breathe Bella, breathe.* My lungs drag in a hasty breath. "Tomorrow… if that's okay. Where would be convenient for you, Sir?"

I can almost hear his sphinx-like smile through the phone.

"I'm staying at the Heathman in Portland. Shall we say 9:30 tomorrow morning?"

"Okay, we'll see you there." I am all gushing and breathy, a child, not a grown woman who can vote and drink legally in the State of Washington.

"I look forward to it Miss Swan." And I can visualize the wicked gleam in his green eyes. *How can he make seven little words hold so much tantalizing promise?* I hang up. Rose is staring at me. Her mouth is still open, a look of complete and utter consternation on her face.

"Isabella Marie Swan. You like him… I've never seen or heard you so…. so… affected by anyone before. You are blushing."

"Oh Rose, you know I blush all the time. It's an occupational hazard with me. Don't be so ridiculous. I just find him intimidating, that's all," I snap at her and she blinks at me with surprise. I very rarely throw my toys out of the pram. I call Jake and tell him we'll pick him up in the morning to drive to the Heathman.

"Heathman, that figures," mutters Rose. "I'll give the manager a call to negotiate a space in the hotel for the shoot."

"I'll make supper, then I have to revise." I cannot hide my irritation with her as I strut toward the kitchen.

I am restless that night, tossing and turning. Dreaming of green eyes, breathable pants, long legs and dark, dark places deep in the forest. I wake twice in the night, my heart pounding. *Oh I'm just going to look great tomorrow with so little sleep,* I scold myself as I punch my pillow and try to settle.

The Heathman nestles downtown in the heart of Portland. It's a pretty impressive brown stone edifice built just before the crash in the late 1920s. Jake, his friend Sam, and I are in my truck. Rose is in her Z4 as we can't all fit in the truck. Sam is Jake's gopher. He's going to help with lighting. Rose has managed to negotiate a free room for the morning, in exchange for a thank you credit to the hotel in the article. She's explained that we are here

to photograph Edward Cullen CEO, and we are upgraded to a suite. Mr. Cullen is already occupying the largest one in the building, so it's a regular-sized suite. The over-keen marketing executive shows us up to the rooms. He's terribly young and very nervous for some reason. I think it's Rose's beauty and her commanding manner that disarms him. He is putty in her hands. The rooms are very elegant, understated and warmly furnished. It's 9:00 A.M., so we have half an hour to set up. Rose goes into full flow.

"Jake, I think we'll shoot against that wall, do you agree?" She doesn't wait for his reply. "Sam, clear the chairs. Bella, ask housekeeping to bring up some refreshments, and let Cullen know where we are."

Yes mistress. She is so domineering. I roll my eyes at her and do as I'm told.

Half an hour later Edward Cullen walks into our suite. Holy crap! He's wearing a white shirt, open at the collar, with grey flannel pants that hang from his hips. His unruly hair is still damp from a shower. My mouth goes dry looking at him. He's so freaking hot. He's followed in by a man in his mid-thirties, all buzz cut and stubble in a sharp dark suit and tie, who goes and stands in the corner, his brown eyes watching us impassively.

"Miss Swan, we meet again." He extends his hand to me and I shake it, blinking rapidly at him. Oh my… he really is…quite…wow… and then I touch his hand and feel that delicious current run right through me, lighting me up, making me blush, and I'm sure my erratic breathing must be audible.

"Mr. Cullen, this is Rosalie Hale," I breathe and wave a hand toward Rose who comes forward, looking him squarely in the eye.

"The tenacious Miss Hale. How do you do?" He smiles slightly, looking genuinely amused. "Are you feeling better? Isabella told me you were unwell last week."

"I'm fine. Thank you, Mr. Cullen." She shakes his hand firmly without batting an eyelid and I have to remember that Rose has been to the best private schools in Washington. Her family has money and she's grown up confident and sure of her place in the world. She doesn't take any crap. I am in awe of her. "Thank you for taking the time to do this." She gives him a polite, professional smile.

"It's a pleasure," he answers, turning his green gaze on me and I flush… again. Damn it.

"This is Jacob Black, our photographer," I say, grinning at Jake who smiles affectionately back at me. His eyes cool when he looks from me to Cullen.

"Mr. Cullen," he nods.

“Mr. Black.” Cullen’s expression changes, appraising Jake. “Where would you like me?” His tone sounds vaguely threatening.

But Rosalie is not going to let Jake run the show.

“Mr. Cullen, if you could sit here, please? Be careful of the lighting cables. And then we’ll do some standing, too.” She directs him to a chair that’s set up against the wall. Sam switches on the lights, momentarily blinding Cullen and then he and I stand back and watch as Jake proceeds to snap away. Jakes takes several photographs hand-held, asking Cullen to turn this way and that, move his arm, down again, and then Jake moves to the tripod and takes several more. Cullen sits and poses patiently, and very naturally, for about twenty minutes. My wish has come true. I can stand and admire him from not-so afar. Twice our eyes lock and I have to tear myself away from his emerald gaze.

“Enough sitting.” Rosalie wades in again. “Standing, Mr. Cullen?” she asks.

He stands and Sam moves in to remove the chair. The shutter on Jacob’s Nikon starts again. “I think we have enough,” Jake says after five minutes.

“Great,” says Rose. “Well, thank you again, Mr. Cullen.” She shakes his hand, as does Jake.

“Thank you. I look forward to reading the article Miss Hale,” he murmurs and walks toward the door where I am standing. “Will you walk with me Miss Swan?” he asks quietly.

“Sure,” I say, completely thrown. I glance anxiously at Rose who shrugs at me. I notice Jacob scowling behind her and he turns to glare at me.

“Good day to you all,” Cullen says to the room in general and he opens the door and stands aside to allow me out first. Holy Crow what’s this about? What does he want? I stand in the corridor fidgeting nervously as he makes his way out of the room. He’s followed by Mr. Buzz Cut in the sharp suit.

“I’ll call you, Taylor,” he murmurs to Buzz Cut and the suited Taylor wanders back down the corridor. He turns his burning green gaze to me. *Crap… have I done something wrong?*

“I wondered if you would join me for coffee this morning?”

My heart slams into my mouth… a date. *Edward Cullen is asking me on a date.* He’s asking if you want a coffee. Maybe he thinks you haven’t woken up yet. My sub-conscious snaps at me, in a sneering mood again. I clear my throat nervously.

“I have to drive everyone home,” I murmur apologetically, twisting my hands and fingers in front of me.

“TAYLOR,” he calls loudly, making me jump. Taylor, who’s still retreating down the corridor turns and returns to us.

“Taylor can take them. Are they based at the university?” I nod, too stunned to speak. “Taylor’s my driver. We have a large 4x4 here, so he’ll be able to take the equipment too.”

“Mr. Cullen?” Taylor asks politely as he reaches us, no expression at all on his face.

“Please can you drive the photographer, his assistant, and Miss Hale back to where they live.”

“Certainly Sir,” Taylor replies.

“There. Now can you join me for coffee?”

I frown at him. “Err… Mr Cullen, err this really… look, Taylor doesn’t have to drive them home.” I flash a brief look at Taylor, who remains stoically impassive. “I’ll swap vehicles with Rose, if you give me a moment.”

Cullen smiles a dazzling, unguarded, natural, all teeth showing, glorious smile at me. *Oh my*… He opens the door of the suite so I can re-enter. I scoot around him to Rosalie, who is in deep discussion with Jacob.

“Well Bella, I think he definitely likes you,” she says with no preamble whatsoever. Jake glares at me disapprovingly. “But I don’t trust him,” she says.

I raise my hands up in the hope that she’ll stop talking. “Rose, will you take the truck and can I take your car?”

“Why?”

“Edward Cullen’s asked me to go for coffee with him.”

Her mouth plops open. Speechless Rose… I enjoy the moment. She comes over to me and takes me by my arm and drags me into the bedroom adjoining the living area of the suite.

“Bella, there’s something about him." Her tone is full of warning. "He’s gorgeous I agree, but I think he’s dangerous, especially to someone like you.”

“What do you mean 'someone like me'?” I demand, affronted.

“An innocent like you, Bella. You know what I mean,” she says, and I flush.

“Rose, it’s just coffee, and I start my exams tomorrow. I need to revise, so I won’t be long.”

She purses her lips at me. She fishes into her pocket, hands me her car keys and I hand her mine.

“I’ll see you later. Don’t be long or I will send out a search party.”

“Thanks Rose.” I hug her briefly and make my way out of the room to where Edward Cullen is waiting, leaning up against the wall, looking like a male model posing for some glossy, high-end magazine.

“Okay, let’s do coffee,” I murmur, flushing a beet red.

He grins.

“After you, Miss Swan.” He stands and holds his hand out for me to go first. I make my way down the corridor, my heart in my mouth, my stomach full of butterflies, and my heart thumping a dramatic, uneven beat.

I am going to have coffee with Edward Cullen... I hate coffee.

Chapter 6

I walk down the wide hotel corridor beside Edward Cullen to the elevators. *What should I say to him?* My mind is suddenly paralyzed with apprehension. What are we going to talk about? What on earth do I have in common with him? He startles me out of my reverie. His voice soft and warm.

"How long have you known Rosalie Hale?"

Oh, an easy questions for starters.

"Since we roomed together during our freshman year. She's a very good friend."

"Hmmm…" he replies, very non-committal. What is he thinking?

We have reached the elevators and he presses the call button. The lift arrives almost immediately, and there's a young couple in a passionate clinch inside. They are surprised and embarrassed as the doors open and jump apart staring guiltily, anywhere but at us. Cullen and I both step into the elevator and I struggle to maintain a straight face, so I gaze down at the floor, feeling my cheeks turning pink. I peek up at Cullen, through my lashes. He has a hint of a smile on his lips but it's very hard to tell. The couple says nothing and we travel down to the first floor in silence. We don't even have trashy piped elevator music to distract us.

As the doors open he takes my hand, clasping it tightly with his long, cool fingers. I feel the current run through me, and my already rapid heart beat increases. He leads me out of the elevator and behind us, as we leave, we can hear the suppressed giggles of the couple finally erupting. Cullen grins.

"What is it about elevators?" he mutters.

He leads me through the expansive, busy, foyer of the hotel and out the front door. He avoids the revolving door and I wonder it that's because he'd have to let go of my hand. It's a mild May Sunday outside. The sun is shining and the traffic is light. He turns left on to the sidewalk and strolls to the corner where we stop at the intersection, waiting for the lights of the pedestrian crossing to change. He's still holding my hand. *I'm in the street and Edward Cullen is holding my hand.*No one has ever held my hand. I feel slightly giddy and tingly all over. I smother the ridiculous grin that's threatening to split my face in two. *Try to be cool Bella* - my subconscious implores me.

The green man appears and we're off again. We walk four blocks before we reach the Portland Coffee House, where he releases me and holds the door open so I can step inside.

"Why don't you choose a table and I'll get the drinks. What would you like?" he asks, polite as ever.

"I'll have err… English Breakfast tea, bag out, no milk please."

He raises his eyebrows. "No coffee?"

"I'm not keen on coffee."

He smiles. "Okay, bag out tea. Sugar?"

For a moment I think it's an endearment and I flush, but fortunately my cerebrum kicks in. *No stupid – do you take sugar?*

"No thanks." I stare down at my knotted fingers.

"Anything to eat?"

"No thank you." I shake my head and he goes to order.

I could watch him all day. He stands at the counter patiently waiting to be served. He's tall, broad shouldered, slim… the way his pants hang from his hips… *Oh my…* Once or twice, he runs his long, graceful fingers through his now-dry disorderly hair. *Hmmm… I'd like to do that.* The thought comes unbidden into my mind and I can feel my face flushing. I bite my lip and stare down at my hands again, not liking where my wayward thoughts are going.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Cullen is back, startling me.

I think I go crimson… *Yes, I was just thinking about running my fingers through your hair wondering if it would feel soft to touch*. I shake my head. He's carrying a tray, which he sets down on the small, round dark-wood table. He hands me a cup and saucer, a small teapot and a side plate on which there is a lone teabag. Twinings English Breakfast, my favorite. He has a coffee, which has a wonderful pattern of a leaf in the milk. *How do they do that?* I wonder idly. He also has a blueberry muffin. He puts the tray down and sits opposite me, crossing his long legs. He looks so… comfortable and at ease in his body. I envy that in him. Here's me, all gawky and uncoordinated, barely able to get from a to b without falling flat on my face.

"Your thoughts?" he prompts me.

"This is my favorite tea." My voice is quiet, breathy. I just can't believe I'm sitting opposite Edward Cullen in a coffee shop in Portland.

He frowns slightly at me… he knows I'm hiding something. I pop the teabag in the teapot and then immediately fish it out with my teaspoon and place the used teabag back on the side plate. He cocks his head quizzically at me.

"I like my tea black and weak."

"I see. Is he your boyfriend?"

Whoa… What… "Who?"

"The photographer, Jacob Black."

What has given him that impression? I laugh, nervously. "No, Jake's a very old friend of mine. We kind of grew up together on a part-time basis. He's from where my father lives. Why did you think he was my boyfriend?" I'm curious to know.

"The way you smiled at him and he at you." His green gaze holds mine.

He's so unnerving. I want to look away but I'm caught… spellbound.

"He's more like family…" I whisper.

Cullen nods slightly, seemingly satisfied with my response, and glances down at his blueberry muffin. His long fingers deftly peel back the paper of the muffin cup. I watch, fascinated.

"Do you want some?" he asks, and that amused, secret smile is back.

"No thanks." I frown and stare down at my hands again.

"And the boy I met yesterday, at the store, he's not your boyfriend?"

"No. Mike's just a friend. I told you yesterday." Oh this is getting silly. "Why do you ask?"

"You seem nervous around men…"

Holy crap… Just nervous around you, Cullen.

"I find you intimidating." I flush scarlet, but mentally pat myself on the back for my candor and I gaze at my hands again.

He gasps. "You should find me intimidating," he murmurs. "You're very honest. Please don't look down. I like to see your face. It's my only way to try and work out what you're thinking."

I glance up. “You can tell what I’m thinking?” I think I actually scoff at him. No way can he tell what I’m thinking… *well, I sincerely hope not.*

“No… it’s very frustrating. I’m usually very good at reading people. But you… you’re very self contained.”

Am I? *Wow… how am I managing that?* And in the back of my mind I feel bewildered. *Me, Self Contained. No Way.*

“Except when you blush of course, which is often. I just wish I knew what you were blushing about.” He pops a small piece of muffin into his mouth and starts to chew slowly, not taking his eyes off me.

And as if on cue, I blush. Crap!

“Well you’re very high-handed,” I retaliate quietly.

He raises his eyebrows and, if I’m not mistaken, he flushes slightly. “I am, always. I’m used to getting my own way, Isabella,” he murmurs. “In all things.”

“I don’t doubt it. Why haven’t you given me your leave to call you by your first name?” I’m surprised by my audacity.

Why has this conversation got so serious? This isn’t going the way I thought it was going to go. I can’t believe I’m feeling so antagonistic toward him now. It’s like he’s trying to warn me off.

“The only people who use my given name are my family and a few close friends. It’s the way I like it.”

So he’s still not saying "Call me Edward." He is a control freak. There’s no other explanation and part of me is thinking that perhaps it would have been better if Rose had interviewed him. Two control freaks together. And of course she’s blond, like the women in his office. *And she’s beautiful,* my subconscious reminds me. I don’t like the idea of Edward and Rose.

I take a sip of my tea as he eats another small piece of his muffin.

“Are you an only child?”

Whoa… he keeps changing direction.

“Yes.”

"Tell me about your parents."

Why does he want to know this… it's so *dull.*

"My Mom lives in Florida with her new husband, Phil. My Dad lives in Forks. He's the police chief there."

"Were you young when they divorced?"

"Yes."

He frowns at me… "You're not giving much away are you?" he says dryly, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

"Neither are you."

"You've interviewed me once already and I can recollect some quite probing questions then." He smirks at me.

Holy crap. He's remembering the 'gay' question. Once again, I'm mortified. In years to come, I know, I'll need a week of intensive therapy to not feel this embarrassed every time I recall the moment. I start babbling about my mother, anything to block *that* memory.

"My Mom is cool. Young at heart, foolish… I miss her. She has Phil now, I just hope he can keep an eye on her and pick up the pieces when her harebrained schemes don't go as planned." I smile fondly… I haven't seen her for so long. Edward is watching me intently, taking occasional sips of his coffee. I really shouldn't look at his mouth… it's unsettling. Those lips…

"And your Dad?"

"Err… well, Charlie is taciturn. He doesn't eat properly. As much as I've tried to teach him how to cook, he's a basic fry, take-out, and doughnuts cop. He likes watching sports and fishing… That's it."

"You sound like you feel responsible for them. Like you're their parent. That must be tough on a young girl…"

"Doesn't feel tough." Where is he going with this? "Tell me about your parents." Two can play at this game.

He shrugs. "My Dad's a very successful doctor, my mom is an interior designer. They live in Seattle." I wonder about Dr. and Mrs. Cullen, who adopt three kids, and one of them

turns out to be a beautiful man who takes on the world of commerce and conquers it single-handed…

"What do your siblings do?"

"Emmett's in construction and my little sister is in Paris studying fashion at one of the couture houses there…"

He looks irritated suddenly. Like he doesn't want to talk about his family or himself.

"Paris, I hear it's lovely," I murmur, why doesn't he want to talk about his family? Is it because he's adopted?

"It's a beautiful city. Have you been?"

"I've never left mainland USA…" So now we're on to banalities. What is he hiding?

"Would you like to go?"

"To Paris?" This throws me. My voice is unnaturally high. Who doesn't want to go to Paris? "Of course. But it's England that I'd really like to visit."

He cocks his head to one side, running his index finger across his lower lip… oh my… "Because...?"

I blink rapidly. *Concentrate, Swan*... "Well it's the home of Shakespeare, Austen, the Brontë sisters… Thomas Hardy… I'd like to see the places that inspired these people to write such wonderful books." All this talk of the literary greats reminds me that I need to be revising. I glance at my watch.

"I'd better go... I have to revise."

"Your exams?"

"Yes, they start on Tuesday."

"Where is Miss Hale's car?"

"In the hotel parking garage."

"I'll walk you back."

"Thank you for the tea… Mr. Cullen."

He smiles slightly, that odd *I've got a whopping big secret* smile.

"You're welcome, Isabella. It's my pleasure. Come," he commands and he holds his hand out to me. I take it, bemused, and I follow him out of the shop.

We stroll back to the hotel and I'd like to say it's in companionable silence. He looks his usual calm, collected self. Me, I'm desperately trying to gauge how our little coffee morning has gone. I feel like I've been interviewed for a position, but I'm not sure what it is…

"Do you always wear jeans?" he asks suddenly, out of the blue.

"Mostly."

He nods. We're standing by the intersection across the road from the hotel. My mind is reeling… *What an odd question.*And I'm aware that our time together is limited. This is it, and I've completely blown it… I know. Perhaps he has someone.

"Do you have a girlfriend?" I blurt out. Holy crap - *I've just said that out loud.*

His lips quirk up in a half smile and he looks down at me. "No, Isabella, I don't. I don't do the girlfriend thing," he says softly.

Oh… *what does that mean?* He's not gay - maybe he is - crap! He lied to me in his interview. And for a moment, I think he's going to follow on with some explanation… some clue to this cryptic statement, but he doesn't. I have to go and try and reassemble my thoughts. I have to get away from him. I walk forward and I trip, stumbling into the road.

"Shit, Bella!" Edward cries and he pulls the hand that he's holding hard so that I fall against him as a cyclist whisks past me, narrowly missing me, riding the wrong way up a one-way street. It happens so fast, one minute I'm falling and then I'm in his arms and he's holding me tightly against his chest, and I can smell his clean, vital scent. He smells of fresh laundered linen, and some expensive body-wash… Oh my, it's intoxicating. I inhale deeply.

"Are you okay?" he whispers. He has one arm around me, clasping me to him, whilst the fingers of his other hand trace softly down my face, gently probing, examining me. His thumb traces my lower lip and I can hear his breath hitch. He's staring into my eyes and I hold his anxious, burning gaze for a moment, or maybe it's forever, but eventually my attention is drawn to his beautiful mouth… Oh my… And for the first time in twenty-one years, I want to be kissed. I want to feel his mouth on me…

Chapter 7

Kiss me, damn it! I implore him, but I can't move. I'm paralyzed with a strange, unfamiliar need, completely captivated by him. I'm staring at Edward Cullen's exquisitely sculptured mouth, mesmerized, and he's looking down at me, his gaze hooded, his eyes darkening. He's breathing harder than usual, whereas I've stopped breathing altogether. *I'm in your arms… holy shit. Kiss me please.* He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and very slightly shakes his head, as if in answer to my silent question. When he opens his eyes again it's with some new purpose, a steely resolve.

"Isabella, you should stay away from me… I'd be no good for you," he whispers.

What? Where is this coming from? Surely I should be the judge of that. I frown up at him and my head swims... with… rejection. "Breathe, Isabella, breathe. I'm going to stand you up and let you go," he says quietly, and he gently pushes me away.

Adrenaline has spiked through my body, from the near miss with the cyclist or the heady proximity to Edward, leaving me wired and weak. *NO!* My psyche screams as he pulls away and I feel suddenly bereft. He has his hands on my shoulders, holding me at arm's length. He's watching my reactions carefully. And the only thing I can think is that I wanted to be kissed, made it pretty bloody obvious, and he didn't do it… *he doesn't want me.* He really doesn't want me. I have royally messed up the coffee morning.

"I've got this," I breathe, finding my voice, finding air for my lungs. "Thank you," I mutter, awash with humiliation. How could I have misread the situation between us so utterly? I need to get away from him.

"For what?" he frowns. He hasn't taken his hands off me.

"For saving me," I whisper.

"Well that idiot was riding the wrong way. I'm glad I was here. I shudder to think what could have happened to you. Do you want to come and sit down in the hotel for a moment?" He lets go of me completely, his hands by his sides, and I'm standing in front of him feeling like a fool.

I clear my head with a shake. I just want to go. All my vague, unarticulated hopes have been dashed. He doesn't want me. *What was I thinking?* I scold myself. *What would Edward Cullen want with you?* My subconscious mocks me. I wrap my arms around myself, and turn to face the road and note with relief that the green man has appeared. I quickly make my way across, conscious that Cullen is behind me. Outside the hotel, I turn briefly to face him, but cannot look him in the eye.

"Thanks for the tea… and doing the photo shoot," I murmur.

"Isabella… I…" he stops and the anguish in his voice demands my attention, and I peer unwillingly up at him. His green eyes blaze at me, and he runs his hand through his hair. He looks torn, frustrated, his expression stark, all his careful control has evaporated…

"What, Edward?" I ask irritably after he says… nothing. I just want to go. I need to take my fragile, wounded pride away and somehow nurse it back to health.

"Good luck with your exams…." he murmurs.

Huh? This is why he looks so desolate? This is the big send off? Just to wish me luck in my exams?

"Thanks." I can't disguise the sarcasm in my voice. "Goodbye, Mr. Cullen."

I turn on my heel, vaguely amazed that I don't trip, and without giving him a second glance I disappear down the sidewalk towards the underground garage.

Once underneath the dark, concrete of the garage with its bleak fluorescent light, I lean against the wall, and put my head in my hands… What was I thinking? And unbidden and unwelcome, I can feel tears pool in my eyes. *Why am I crying?* I sink to the ground angry at myself for this senseless reaction. I draw up my knees, folding myself up. I want to make myself as small as possible. Perhaps this nonsensical pain will be smaller, the smaller I am. I put head on my knees, letting the irrational tears fall unrestrained. I am crying over the loss of something I never had. *How ridiculous.*Mourning something that never was - dashed hopes, dashed dreams, soured expectations.

I have never been on the receiving end of rejection. Okay, so I was always one of the last to be picked for basketball or volleyball – but I understood that – running and doing something else at the same time like bouncing or throwing a ball is not my thing. I am a serious liability in any field of sport I've tried.

Romantically, though… I have never put myself out there, ever. A lifetime of insecurity – I'm too pale, too skinny, too scruffy, uncoordinated… my long list of faults goes on. So I have always been the one to rebuff any would be admirers. No one has ever sparked my interest. No one except Edward bloody Cullen. Maybe I should be kinder to the likes of Mike Newton and Jacob Black, though I'm sure neither of them have been found sobbing in dark places.

I don't know, perhaps I just need a good cry… here in a bloody underground garage in the middle of Portland.

Stop! Stop Now! - My subconscious is metaphorically glaring at me, arms folded, leaning on one leg and tapping its foot at me in frustration. *Get in the car, go home, do your revision. Forget about him… Now! And stop all this self-pitying, wallowing crap.* Okay, okay… I take a deep steadying breath and stand up. Get it together, Swan. I head for Rose's car, wiping the tears off my face as I do. I will not think of him again. I can just chalk this incident up to experience and concentrate on my exams.

Rose is sitting at the dining table at her laptop when I come in. Her welcoming smile fades when she sees me.

"Bella, what's wrong?"

Oh no… not the Rosalie Hale Inquisition. I shake my head at her in a *back-off now Hale* way… I might as well be dealing with a blind, deaf mute.

"You've been crying." She has an exceptional gift for stating the bloody obvious sometimes. "What did that bastard do to you?" she growls and her face... She's scary.

"Nothing, Rose." That's actually the problem. The thought brings a wry smile to my face.

"Then why have you been crying? You never cry," she says softly as she stands and comes over to me, her dark blue eyes brimming with concern and very gently, she puts her arms around me and hugs me. I need to say something, just to get her off my back.

"I was nearly knocked over by a cyclist." It's the best that I can do but it distracts her momentarily from… him.

"Gee, Bella, are you okay? Were you hurt?" She holds me at arm's length and does a quick visual check-up on me.

"No… Edward saved me," I whisper. "But I was quite shaken."

"I'm not surprised. How was coffee? I know you hate coffee…"

"I had tea. It was fine. Nothing to report, really. I don't know why he asked me."

"He likes you, Bella." She drops her arms.

"Well… not anymore. I won't be seeing him again." Yes, I manage to sound matter of fact.

"Oh?"

Crap… she's intrigued. I head into the kitchen so that she can't see my face. "Yeah… he's a little of my league, Rose," I say as dryly as I can manage.

“What do you mean?”

“Oh Rose, it’s obvious.” I whirl around and face her as she stands in the kitchen doorway.

“Not to me,” she says. “Okay, he’s got more money than you… but then, he has more money than most people in America!”

“Rose, he’s…”

“You just don’t see yourself at all, do you Bella?” she interrupts me. Oh no… she’s off on this tirade again.

“Rose, please. I need to study.” I cut her short.

She frowns at me. “Well, do you want to see the article? It’s finished. Jake took some great pictures.”

Oh no… a visual reminder of the beautiful Edward - *I don’t want you* - Cullen.

“Sure.” I magic a smile on to my face and walk over to the laptop. And there he is, staring at me in black and white. Staring at me and finding me lacking. I pretend to read the article, all the time meeting his steady grey gaze, searching the photo for some clue as to why he’d be no good for me… his own words. And it’s suddenly, blindingly obvious. He’s too gloriously good looking, we are poles apart, from two very different worlds… and I have a vision of myself as Icarus, flying too close to the sun and crashing and burning as a result. And his words make sense. This is what he meant and it makes his rejection easier to accept… almost. I can live with this. I understand.

“Very good Rose,” I manage. “I’m going to revise.” I am not going to think about him again… for now, I promise myself, and I open up my revision notes and start to read.

It’s only when I’m in bed, trying to sleep, that I allow my thoughts to drift through my strange morning. I keep coming back to the "*I don’t do the girlfriend thing"* quote and I am angry that I didn’t pounce on this information sooner… when I was in his arms… mentally begging him with every fiber of my being to kiss me. He’d said it there and then… he didn’t want me as a girlfriend. I turn on to my side. Idly, I wonder if perhaps he’s celibate? Maybe he’s saving himself… *Well not for you,* my sleepy subconscious has a final swipe at me, before unleashing itself on my dreams. That night I dream of green eyes, leafy patterns in milk, and I’m running through dark places with eerie strip lighting, and I don’t know if I’m running towards something or away from it… it’s just not clear.

Chapter 8

I put my pen down. Finished. My final exam is over. I can feel the Cheshire cat grin spread over my face. It's probably the first time all week that I've smiled. It's Friday and we shall be celebrating tonight, really celebrating. I might even get drunk! I've never been drunk before… I glance across the sports hall at Rose and she's still scribbling furiously… five minutes to the end. This is it, the end of my academic career. I shall never have to sit in rows of anxious, isolated students again. Inside, I'm doing graceful cartwheels around my head, knowing full well that's the only place I can do graceful cartwheels. Rose stops writing and puts her pen down. She glances across at me and I catch her Cheshire cat smile too.

We head back to our apartment together in my truck, refusing to discuss our final paper. Rose is more concerned about what she's going to wear to the bar this evening. I am busily fishing around in my bag for my keys.

"Bella, there's a package for you." Rose is standing on the steps up to the front door holding a brown paper parcel. Odd… I haven't ordered anything from Amazon recently. Rose gives me the parcel and takes my keys to open the front door.

Miss Isabella Swan

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There's no sender's address or name. Perhaps from my mom or dad… of course.

"It's probably from my folks."

"Open it!" Rose is all excited as she heads into the kitchen for our 'Exams are finished hurrah Champagne'.

I open the parcel and inside find a half-leather box containing three seemingly identical old cloth-covered books in mint condition, and a plain white card that floats on to the floor. I pick the card up off the floor and written on one side, in black ink in very neat cursive handwriting is:

Why didn't you tell me there was danger? Why didn't you warn me?

Ladies know what to guard against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks…

And I recognize immediately that it's a quote from *Tess.* I am stunned by the irony as I've just spent three hours writing about the novels of Thomas Hardy in my final examination. Perhaps there is no irony… perhaps it's deliberate. I inspect the books closely. Three volumes of *Tess of the D'Urbervilles.* I open the front cover. Written in an old typeface on the front plate is:

'London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine and Co., 1891.'

Holy Crow - they are first editions. They must be worth a fortune and I know immediately who's sent them to me. Rose is at my shoulder gazing at the books. She picks up the card.

"First Editions," I whisper.

"No…" Rose's eyes are wide with disbelief. "Cullen?"

I nod. "Can't think of anyone else…"

"What does this card mean?"

"I have no idea, but I think it's a warning… Honestly, he keeps warning me off. It's not like I'm beating his door down." I frown.

"I know you don't want to talk about him, but Bella, he's seriously into you. Warnings or no."

I have not let myself dwell on Edward Cullen for the past week. Okay… so his green eyes are still haunting my dreams and I know it will take an eternity to expunge the feel of his arms around me, and his wonderful fragrance from my brain. Why has he sent me this? He pretty much told me that I wasn't for him.

"I've found one *Tess* first edition for sale in New York at $14,000. But yours looks in much better condition. They must have cost more." Rose is consulting her good friend Google.

"This quote… Tess says it to her mother after Alec D'Urberville has had his wicked way with her."

"I know…" muses Rose. "What is he trying to say?"

"I don't know and I don't care. I can't accept these from him. I'll send them back with an equally baffling quote from some obscure part of the book."

"The bit where Angel Clare says fuck off?" Rose asks with a completely straight face.

"Yes, that bit." I giggle. I love Rose, she's so loyal and supportive. I repack the books and leave them on the dining table. Rose hands me a glass of champagne.

"To the end of exams, and our new life in Seattle." She grins.

"To the end of exams, our new life in Seattle, and excellent results." We clink glasses and drink.

The bar is loud and hectic, full of soon-to-be graduates out to get trashed. Jacob joins us. He still has another year before his finals, but he's in the mood to party and gets us into the spirit of our new found freedom by buying a pitcher of margaritas for us all. As I down my third, I know this is not a good idea on top of the champagne.

"So what now, Bella?" Jake shouts at me over the noise.

"Rose and I are moving to Seattle. Rose's parents have bought a condo there for her."

"Hey… how the other half live. But you'll be back for my show."

"Of course, Jake. Wouldn't miss it for the world." I smile at him and he puts his arm around my waist and pulls me close.

"It means a lot to me that you'll be there, Bella," he whispers in my ear. "Another margarita?"

"Jacob Black, are you trying to get me drunk? Because I think it's working." I giggle. "I think I'd better have a beer. I'll go get us a pitcher."

"More drink Bella!" Rose bellows. Rose has the constitution of an ox. She's got her arm draped over Eric, one of our fellow English students, who's also the official photographer for *Eyewitness*. I think he's given up taking photos of the drunkenness that surrounds him. He only has eyes for Rose. She's all tiny camisole, tight jeans, and high heels, blond hair piled high with tendrils hanging down softly around her face… Her usual stunning self. Me, I'm more of a Converse and t-shirt kind of girl, but I'm wearing my most flattering jeans. I move out of Jacob's hold and get up from our table. Whoa… head spin… I immediately have to grab the back of the chair. Tequila-based cocktails are not a good idea. Everyone knows that, surely.

I make my way to the bar and decide that I ought to visit the powder room whilst I am on my feet. *Good thinking, Bella.* I stagger off through the crowd. Of course there's a line, but

at least it's quiet and cool in the corridor. I reach for my cell phone while I wait, something to fidget with. *Hmmm… who did I last call?* Hmmm… Jake. Before that a number I don't recognize… Cullen, I think this is his number. I giggle. I have no idea what the time is… maybe I'll wake him. Perhaps he can tell me why he sent me those books. And the cryptic message. If he wants me to stay away, he should leave me alone. I suppress a drunken grin and hit the automatic re-dial. He answers on the second ring.

"Isabella?" He's surprised to hear me. Well frankly, I'm surprised to ring him. My befuddled brain registers, *how does he know it's me?*

"Why did you send me the books?" I slur at him.

"Isabella, are you okay? You sound strange." His voice is filled with concern.

"I'm not the strange one…. you are…" I accuse. There - that told him, my courage fuelled by alcohol.

"Isabella, have you been drinking?"

"What's it to you?"

"I'm…curious. Where are you?"

"In a bar…"

"Which bar?" He sounds exasperated. "How are you getting home?"

"I'll find a way." This conversation is not going how I expected.

"Which bar are you in?"

"Why did you send me the books, Edward?"

"Isabella, where are you? Tell me now." His tone is so, so dictatorial. His usual control freak. I imagine him as an old time movie director wearing jodhpurs, holding an old-fashioned megaphone and a riding crop. The image makes me laugh out loud.

"You're so… domineering…" I giggle.

"Bella, so help me, where the fuck are you?"

Edward Cullen is swearing at me. I giggle again. "I'm in Portland… s'a long way from Seattle…"

"Where in Portland?"

"Goodnight, Edward."

"Bella…!"

I hang up. Ha! Though he didn't tell me about the books. I frown. Mission not accomplished. I am really quite drunk. My head swims uncomfortably as I shuffle along the line. Well the object of the exercise was to get drunk…. This is what it's like, *hmmm, probably not an experience to be repeated*. The line has moved and it's now my turn. I stare blankly at the poster on the back of the toilet door that extols the virtues of safe sex. Holy crap did I just call Edward Cullen? Shit. My phone rings and it makes me jump and I yelp in surprise.

"Hi," I bleat timidly in to the phone. I hadn't counted on this.

"I'm coming to get you," he says and hangs up. Only Edward Cullen could sound so calm and so threatening at the same time.

Holy Crap. I pull my jeans up. My heart is thumping. I'm going to be sick… no… I'm fine. Hang on. He's just messing with my head. I didn't tell him where I was. He can't find me here. Besides, it will take him hours to get here from Seattle, and we'll be long gone by then. I wash my hands and check my face in the mirror. I look flushed and slightly unfocused….*hmmm, that will be the tequila then.*

I wait at the bar for what feels like an eternity for the pitcher of beer and eventually return to the table.

"You've been gone so long," Rose scolds me. "Where were you?"

"I was waiting in line for the restroom."

Jacob and Eric are having some heated debate about our local baseball team. Jake pauses in his tirade to pour us all beers and I take a long sip.

"Rose, I think I'd better step outside and get some fresh air…"

"Oh Bella, you are such a lightweight."

"I'll be five minutes."

I make my way through the crowd again. I am beginning to feel nauseous and my head is spinning uncomfortably, and I'm a little unsteady on my feet. More unsteady than usual. Drinking in the cool evening air in the parking lot makes me realize exactly how drunk I

am. My vision has been affected and I'm really seeing double of everything, like in old re-runs of *Tom and Jerry* Cartoons. I think I'm going to be sick. Why did I let myself get this messed up…?

"Bella." Jake has joined me. "You okay?"

"I think I've just had a bit too much to drink." I smile weakly at him.

"Me too," he murmurs and his dark eyes are watching me intently. "Do you need a hand?" he asks and steps closer, putting his arm around me.

"Jake, I'm okay, I think I've got this…" I try and push him away, rather feebly.

"Bella, please," he whispers and now he's holding me in his arms, pulling me close.

"Jake, what are you doing?"

"You know I like you, Bella. Please." He has one hand at the small of my back holding me against him, the other at my chin tipping back my head. *Holy Crow… he's going to kiss me.*

"No Jake, stop… No." I push at him, but he's a wall of hard muscle and I cannot shift him. His hand has slipped into my hair and he's holding my head in place.

"Please, Bella," he whispers against my lips and his breath is soft and smells sweet, of margarita and beer. He gently trails kisses along my jaw up to the side of my mouth. I feel panicky, drunk and out of control. The feeling is suffocating…

"Jake, no…" I plead. I don't want this. You are my friend and I think I'm going to throw up.

"I think the lady said no." Holy shit… Edward Cullen, he's here. How?

Jake releases me. "Cullen," he says tersely.

I glance anxiously up at Edward. He's glowering at Jake, not looking at me, and I can tell he's furious. Holy Crap. My stomach heaves and I double over, my body no longer able to tolerate the alcohol and I vomit spectacularly on to the ground.

Chapter 9

"Ugh – Bella!" Jake jumps back in disgust.

Cullen grabs my hair and pulls it out of the firing line and gently leads me over to a raised flowerbed on the edge of the parking lot. I note, with deep gratitude, that it's in relative darkness.

"If you're going to throw up again, do it here. I'll hold you."

He has one arm around my shoulders, the other is holding my hair in a makeshift ponytail down my back, so it's off my face. I try once, awkwardly, to push him away, but I vomit again, and again… *oh shit… how long is this going to last*, and again. I keep vomiting and it continues, even when my stomach's empty and nothing is coming up, horrible dry heaves wracking my body. I will never ever drink again, I silently vow… this is just too appalling for words. My hands are resting on the brick wall of the flowerbed, barely holding me up. Vomiting profusely is exhausting. Cullen takes his hands off me and passes me a handkerchief. Only he would have a monogrammed, freshly laundered, linen handkerchief. I didn't know you could still buy these. I wipe my mouth. I cannot bring myself to look at him. I'm disgusted with myself and swamped with shame. I just want to be swallowed up by the azaleas in the flowerbed. I want to be anywhere but here.

I'm aware that Jake is hovering somewhere in the background. I groan and put my head in my hands. This has to be the single worst moment of my life. My head is still swimming as I try to remember a worse one… and I can only come up with Edward's rejection. This is so, so many shades darker in terms of humiliation. I risk a peek at him. He's staring down at me, his face composed, giving nothing away. I turn and glance at Jake who looks frankly pretty shamefaced himself and, like me, intimidated by Cullen. I glare at him. I have a few choice words for my so-called oldest friend, none of which I can repeat in front of Edward Cullen Esquire. *Bella who are you kidding, he's just seen you hurl all over the ground and into the local flora. There's no disguising your lack of ladylike behavior.*

"I'll err… see you inside," Jake mutters and he makes his way back into the building.

I'm on my own with Cullen. Holy crap. What should I say to him? Apologize for the phone call.

"I'm sorry," I mutter staring at the handkerchief, which I am furiously fondling with my fingers. *It's so soft…*

"What are you sorry for, Isabella?"

Oh crap, he wants his bloody pound of flesh.

“The phone call mainly. Being sick… oh, the list is endless,” I murmur and I can feel my skin coloring up. *Please, please can I die now?*

“We’ve all been here. Perhaps not quite as dramatically as you,” he says dryly. “It’s about knowing your limits, Isabella. I mean, I’m all for pushing limits but really. This is beyond the pale. Do you make a habit of this kind of behavior?”

My head buzzes with excess alcohol and irritation. What the hell has it got to do with him? I didn’t invite him here. He sounds like a middle-aged man. Scolding me like an errant child and part of me wants to say, if I want to get drunk every night like this, then it’s my decision and nothing to do with him, but I’m not brave enough. Not now that I’ve thrown up in front of him. Why hasn't he run screaming into the hills?

“No…” I say contritely. “I’ve never been drunk before. And right now I have no desire to ever be again.”

I just don’t understand why he’s still here. I begin to feel faint. He notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall, and hoists me into his arms, holding me close to his chest like a child.

“Come on, I’ll take you home,” he murmurs.

“I need to tell Rose.” *Holy crap I’m in his arms again.*

“My brother can tell her.”

“What?”

“My brother Emmett is talking to Miss Hale.”

“Oh?” I don’t understand.

“He was with me when you phoned.”

“In Seattle?” I’m confused.

“No, I’m staying at the Heathman.”

Still? Why?

“How did you find me?”

"I tracked your cell phone Isabella."

Oh… of course he did. How is that possible. Is it legal? *Stalker,* my subconscious whispers at me through the cloud of tequila that's still floating in my brain, but somehow, because it's him, I don't mind.

"Do you have a jacket or a bag?"

"Err… yes, I came with both. Edward please, I need to tell Rose, she'll worry." His mouth presses into a hard line and he sighs heavily.

"If you must."

He sets me down and, taking my hand, leads me back into the bar. I feel weak, still drunk, embarrassed, exhausted, mortified… and on some strange level, absolutely off the scale thrilled. He's clutching my hand – such a confusing array of emotions. I'll need at least a week to process them all.

It's noisy, crowded, and the music has started so there is a large crowd on the dance floor. Rose is not at our table, and Jake seems to have disappeared. Eric is looking lost and forlorn on his own.

"Where's Rose?" I shout at Eric above the noise. My head is beginning to pound in time to the thumping bass line of the music.

"Dancing," Eric shouts back at me and I can tell he's mad. He's eyeing Edward suspiciously. I struggle into my black jacket and place my small shoulder bag over my head so it sits at my hip. I'm ready to go, once I've seen Rose.

"She's on the dance floor," I touch Edward's arm and lean up and shout in his ear, brushing his hair with my nose, smelling his clean, fresh smell… *oh my.* And all those forbidden, unfamiliar feelings that I have tried to deny surface and run amok through my drained body. I feel myself flush and somewhere deep, deep down my muscles clench deliciously.

He rolls his eyes at me and takes me by the hand again and leads me to the bar. He's served immediately, no waiting for Mr. control-freak Cullen. Does everything come so easily to him? I can't hear what he orders. He hands me a very large glass of iced water.

"Drink," he shouts his order at me.

The moving lights are twisting and turning in time to the music, casting strange colored light and shadows all over the bar and the clientele. He's alternately green, blue, white, and a demonic red. He's watching me intently. I take a tentative sip.

"All of it," he shouts. He's so overbearing. He runs his hand through his unruly hair. He looks frustrated, angry. What is his problem? Well, apart from a silly drunk girl ringing him in the middle of the night so he thinks she needs rescuing and it turns out she does, from her over-amorous oldest friend and then seeing her being violently ill at his feet. *Oh Bella… are you ever going to live this down?* My subconscious is figuratively tutting and glaring at me over her half moon specs. I sway slightly and he puts his hand on my shoulder to steady me. I do as I'm told and drink the entire glass. It makes me feel… queasy. He takes the glass from me and places it on the bar. I notice through a blur what he's wearing: a loose white linen shirt, tight jeans, black Converse sneakers, and a dark pinstriped jacket. His shirt is unbuttoned at the top and I see a sprinkling of hair in the gap. In my groggy frame of mind he looks… hmmm... yummy.

He takes my hand. Holy Crow, he's leading me on to the dance floor. Shit. I do not dance. He can sense my reluctance, and under the colored lights I can see his amused, slightly sardonic smile. He gives my hand a sharp tug and I'm in his arms again and he starts to move, taking me with him. Holy Crap, he can dance, and I can't believe that I'm following him step for step. Maybe because I'm drunk I can keep up. He's holding me tight against him. I can feel his body against mine, if he wasn't clutching me so tightly I'm sure I would swoon at his feet. In the back of my mind my mother's often-recited warning comes to me: *Never trust a man who can dance.*

In my befuddled state, it takes a moment to realize what he's doing. He's moved us through the crowded throng of dancers to the other side of the dance floor and we are beside Rose and Emmett, Edward's brother. The music is pounding away, loud and leery, outside and inside my head… *Oh no. Rose is making her moves*. She's dancing her ass off and she only ever does that if she likes someone, really likes someone. Means there'll be three of us for breakfast tomorrow morning. *Rose!* Edward leans over and shouts in Emmett's ear. I cannot hear what he says. Emmett is tall with wide shoulders and curly dark hair and light wickedly gleaming eyes. I can't tell the color under the pulsating heat of the flashing lights. He grins and pulls Rose into his arms, where she is more than happy to be… *Rose!* Even in my inebriated state I am slightly shocked. She's only just met him… surely. She nods to whatever Emmett says and grins at me and waves, and Edward propels us off the dance floor in double quick time.

But I never got to talk to her… Is she okay? I can see where things are heading for her and him. *I need to do the safe sex lecture*. In the back of my mind, I hope she reads one of the posters on the back of the toilet doors. My thoughts crash through my brain, fighting the drunk, fuzzy feeling. It's so warm in here, so loud… so colorful – too bright. My head begins to swim, oh no… and I can feel the floor coming up to meet my face, or so it feels, and the last thing I hear before I pass out is Edward Cullen's harsh epithet.

"Fuck!"

Chapter 10

It's very quiet. The light is muted. I am beyond comfortable and warm, in this bed. *Hmmm*… I open my eyes and for a moment I'm tranquil, serene, enjoying the very strange unfamiliar surroundings. I have no idea where I am. The headboard behind me is in the shape of a massive sun. Hold on, it's oddly familiar. The room is large and airy and plushly furnished, in browns and golds and beige. I have seen it before. Where? My befuddled brain struggles through its recent visual memories. Holy crap. I'm in the Heathman hotel… in a suite. I have stood in a room similar to this with Rose. This looks bigger. Oh shit… I'm in Edward Cullen's suite. How did I get here? The fractured memories of the previous night come slowly back to haunt me. The drinking, *oh no the drinking*, the phone call, *oh no the throwing up.* Jake… Edward… oh no. I cringe inwardly. I don't remember coming here. I'm wearing my t-shirt and bra, and my panties… no socks… no jeans… Holy shit.

I glance at the bedside table. On it is a glass of orange juice and two white tablets. Advil. Control freak that he is, he thinks of everything. I sit up and take the tablets. Actually, I don't feel that bad. Probably much better than I deserve. The orange juice tastes divine, thirst-quenching, refreshing, reviving. Oh, nothing beats freshly squeezed orange juice for bottom-of-bird-cage mouth.

There's a knock on the door. Oh no, he's back from wherever he's been. I can't seem to find my voice. He opens the door anyway and strolls in.

Holy crap, he's been working out. He's in grey sweat pants, that hang, in that way, off his hips, and a grey undershirt, which is dark with sweat, like his hair. *Edward Cullen's sweat.* I take a deep breath and close my eyes. Like a two-year-old… if I close my eyes then I'm not really here.

"Good morning, Isabella. How are you feeling?"

Oh no. Should I try for remorse? Attack myself, is that the best form of defense?

"Better than I deserve," I mumble.

I peek up at him. He places a large shopping bag on a chair and grasps each end of a towel that he has around his neck. He's staring at me, green eyes dark, and as usual I have no idea what he's thinking. He hides his thoughts and feelings so well.

"How did I get here?" My voice is small, contrite.

He comes and sits on the edge of the bed. He's close enough for me to touch, for me to smell… *oh my.* Sweat and body wash and Edward… It's a heady cocktail. So much better than a margarita, and now I can speak from experience.

"Well, after you passed out, I didn't want to risk the leather upholstery in my car taking you all the way back to your apartment. So I brought you here," he says phlegmatically.

"Did you put me to bed?"

"Yes." His face is impassive.

"Did I throw up again?" My voice is quieter.

"No."

"Did you undress me?" I whisper.

"Yes… " He quirks an eyebrow at me as I blush furiously.

"We didn't…" I whisper, my mouth drying in mortified horror as I can't complete the question. I stare at my hands.

"Isabella, you were comatose. Necrophilia is not my thing. I like my women sentient and receptive…. Trust me," he says dryly.

"I'm so sorry."

His mouth lifts slightly in a wry smile.

"It was a very diverting evening. Not one that I'll forget in a while."

Me neither. Oh, he's laughing at me… the bastard. I didn't ask him to come and get me. Somehow I've been made to feel like the villain of the piece.

"You didn't have to track me down with what ever James Bond stuff you're developing for the highest bidder," I snap at him.

He stares at me, surprised, and if I'm not mistaken, a little wounded.

"Firstly, the technology to track cell phones is available over the internet. Secondly, my company does not invest or manufacture any kind of surveillance devices, and thirdly, if I hadn't come to get you… you'd probably be waking up in the photographer's bed, and from what I can remember, you weren't over enthused about him pressing his suit," he says acidly.

Pressing his suit! I glance up at Edward. He's glaring at me, his green eyes blazing, aggrieved. I try to bite my lip, but I fail to repress my laughter.

"Which medieval chronicle did you escape from?" I giggle. "You sound like a courtly knight."

He gazes at me, and his mood visibly shifts. His eyes soften and his expression warms, and I see a trace of a smile on his beautifully chiseled lips.

"Oh, Isabella. I don't think so. Dark knight, maybe…" His smile is sardonic, and he shakes his head. "Did you eat last night?" His tone is accusatory.

I shake my head. What major transgression have I committed now? His jaw clenches, but his face remains impassive.

"You need to eat. That's why you were so ill. Honestly, Isabella, it's drinking rule number one." He runs this hand through his hair and I know it's because he's exasperated.

"Are you going to continue to scold me?"

"Is that what I'm doing?"

"I think so…"

"You're lucky I'm just scolding you."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you were mine, you wouldn't be able to sit down for a week after the stunt you pulled yesterday. You didn't eat, you got drunk, you put yourself at risk…" He closes his eyes, dread etched on his lovely face, and he shudders slightly. When he opens his eyes he glares at me. "I hate to think what could have happened to you."

I scowl back at him. What is his problem? What's it to him? If I was his… *well I'm not*… though maybe, part of me, would like to be. The thought pierces through the irritation I feel at his high-handed words. I flush at the waywardness of my subconscious. She's doing her happy dance in a bright red hula skirt at the thought of being his.

"I would have been fine. I was with Rose."

"And the photographer?" he snaps at me.

Hmmm… young Jacob. I'll need to face him at some point. I shrug slightly. "Jacob just got out of line."

“Well, the next time he gets out of line maybe someone should teach him some manners.”

“You are quite the disciplinarian,” I hiss at him.

“Oh, Isabella… you have no idea.” He grins at me and it’s so disarming. One minute I’m confused and angry, the next I’m gazing at his gorgeous smile. *Wow*... I am beyond dazzled and it’s because his smile is so rare. I quite forget what he’s talking about.

“I’m going to have a shower. Unless you’d like to shower first?” He cocks his head to one side, still grinning. My heartbeat has picked up and my medulla oblongata has neglected to fire any synapses to make me breathe. His grin widens and he reaches over and runs this thumb down my cheek and across my lower lip.

“Breathe Isabella,” he whispers and he rises. “Breakfast will be here in fifteen minutes. You must be famished.” He heads into the ensuite bathroom and closes the door.

Holy shit… Why is he so bloody attractive? Right now I want to go and join him in the shower. I have never felt this way about anyone. My hormones are racing. I can feel the hum from the path of his thumb, echoing on my face and lower lip where he’s touched me. I feel like squirming with a needy, achy… discomfort. I don’t understand this reaction.

Desire… This is desire… This is what it feels like.

I lie back on the soft feather filled pillows. *"If you were mine."* Oh my. What would I do to be his? He’s the only man who has ever set my blood racing around my body. Yet he’s so antagonizing, too; he’s so difficult, complicated, and confusing. He rebuffs me one minute, then he sends me fourteen-thousand-dollar collections of books, then he tracks me like a stalker.

And for all that, I have spent the night in his hotel suite… and I feel safe. Protected. He cares enough to come and rescue me from some mistakenly perceived danger. He’s not a dark knight at all, but a white knight in shining, dazzling armor. A classic romantic hero. Sir Gawain or Lancelot... *hmmm.*

I scramble out of his bed, frantically searching for my jeans. He emerges from the bathroom wet and glistening from the shower, and still unshaven, with just a towel around his waist and there am I, all bare legs and awkward gawkiness. He’s surprised to see me out of bed.

“If you’re looking for your jeans, I’ve sent them to the laundry.” His gaze is a dark jade. “They were spattered with your vomit.”

“Oh…” I flush scarlet. Why oh why does he always catch me on the back foot?

“I sent Taylor out for another pair, and some shoes. They’re in the bag on the chair.”

Oh… clean clothes. What an unexpected bonus.

“Err… I’ll have a shower,” I mutter. “Thanks…” What else can I say? I grab the bag and scurry into the bathroom away from naked Edward… oh my. Michelangelo’s David has nothing on him. His proximity is so unnerving. In the bathroom, it’s all hot and steamy from where he’s been showering. I strip off my clothes, anxious to be under the cleansing stream of the shower. The water cascades over me. I hold my face up into the oncoming torrent. I want Edward Cullen. I want him, badly. Simple fact. For the first time in my life, I want to go to bed with a man. I want to feel his hands and his mouth on me. He said he likes his women sentient. *He’s probably not celibate then.* But he’s made no move on me, not like Mike or Jacob. I don’t understand. Does he want me? He wouldn’t kiss me last week. Am I repellent to him? And yet, I’m here and he brought me here. I just don’t know what his game is? What he's thinking? *You’ve slept in his bed all night and he’s not touched you Bella… You do the math.* My subconscious has reared her ugly, snide head. I ignore her. The water is so warm…soothing. *Hmmm…* I could stay under this shower, in his bathroom forever… *hmmm.* I reach for the body wash and it smells of him. It’s a delicious smell. I rub it all over myself, fantasizing that it’s him - him rubbing this heavenly scented soap into my body, across my breasts, over my stomach, between my thighs… with his long fingered hands. *Oh my.* My heart beat picks up again. This feels so… so good.

“Breakfast is here.” He knocks on the door, startling me.

“Okay,” I stutter as I’m yanked cruelly out of my erotic daydream.

I climb out of the shower and dry myself quickly. I put my hair in a towel and wrap it Carmen Miranda style on my head. I dry myself quickly, ignoring the pleasurable feel of the towel rubbing against my over-sensitized skin.

I inspect the bag of jeans. Not only has Taylor brought me jeans and new Converse, but a royal blue blouse, socks and - underwear. Holy crap. A clean bra and panties. Actually, to describe them in such a mundane, utilitarian way does not do them justice. They are an exquisite design of some fancy European lingerie. All pale blue lace and finery… wow... I am in awe, and slightly daunted by this underwear. What’s more, they fit perfectly. But of course they do. I flush to think of the Buzz Cut man in some lingerie shop buying this for me. I wonder what else is in his job description.

I dress quickly. The rest of the clothing is a perfect fit. I brusquely towel dry my hair and try desperately to bring it under control. But once more it refuses to cooperate and my only option is to restrain it with a hair tie… I have none. Maybe in my bag, which is not in here. I take a deep breath. Time to face Mr. Confusing.

He's not in the bedroom. I quickly have a look around for my bag, but it's not in here. I walk through the bedroom into the rest of the suite.

Holy cow. It's huge. There's an opulent, plush seating area, all overstuffed couches and soft cushions, an elaborate coffee table with a stack of large glossy books, a study area with a top-of-the-range Mac, an enormous plasma screen TV on the wall… and Edward sitting at a dining table on the other side of the room, reading a newspaper. It's the size of a tennis court or something… not that I play tennis… though I have watched Rose a few times. *Rose!*

"Holy crow… Rose," I croak. Edward peers up at me.

"She knows you're here and still alive. I texted Emmett," he says with just a trace of humor.

Oh no… I remember her fervent ardor of the night before. All that dancing, with Edward's brother no less! What's she going to think about me being here? I've never stayed out before. She's still with Emmett. She's only done this twice before, and both times I had to endure the hideous pink PJs from the fallout, for a week afterwards. She's going to think I've had a one-night stand, too.

Edward stares at me imperiously. He's wearing a white linen shirt, collar and cuffs undone.

"Sit," he commands, pointing to a place at the table.

I make my way over and sit down opposite him, as I've been directed. The table is laden with food.

"I didn't know what you liked, so I ordered one of everything off the breakfast menu." He smiles a crooked apologetic grin at me.

"Well, that's very profligate of you," I murmur, bewildered by the choice, though I am hungry. I opt for pancakes, maple syrup, scrambled egg and bacon. Edward tries to hide a smile as he returns to his egg white omelet or whatever he's having. The food is delicious.

"Tea?" he asks.

"Yes, please." He passes me a small teapot of hot water and on a saucer a Twining's English Breakfast teabag. Jeez, he remembers how I like my tea.

"Your hair is very damp," he scolds.

"Err… I couldn't find the hairdryer," I mutter, embarrassed. Not that I looked.

Edward's mouth presses into a hard line but he doesn't say anything.

"Thank you for organizing the clothes."

"It's a pleasure, Isabella. That blue suits you."

I think I flush crimson and stare down at my fingers.

"You know, you really should learn to take a compliment." His tone is castigating.

"I should give you some money for them. To pay you back."

He's glaring at me now as if I have offended him on some level. I hurry on.

"You've already given me the books, which, of course, I can't accept. But these clothes, please let me pay you back." I smile tentatively at him.

"Isabella, trust me, I can afford it."

"That's not the point. Why should you buy these for me?"

"Because I can." His eyes flash with a wicked gleam.

"Just because you can, doesn't mean that you should," I reply quietly as he arches an eyebrow at me, his eyes twinkling, and suddenly I get the feeling that we're talking about something else, but I don't know what it is. Which reminds me…"Why did you send me the books, Edward?" My voice is soft.

He puts down his cutlery and regards me intently, his green eyes burning with some unfathomable emotion. Holy crow – my mouth dries.

"Well, when you were nearly run over by the cyclist, and I was holding you and you were looking up at me all 'kiss me, kiss me Edward'…" he pauses and shrugs slightly, "I felt I owed you an apology, and a warning."

He runs his hand through his hair. "Isabella, I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of man. I don't do romance. My tastes are very singular. You should stay away from me." He closes his eyes as if in defeat. "I'm very drawn to you. In fact, I'm finding it impossible to stay away from you, but I think you've figured that out already."

"Well, don't," I murmur. My appetite has vanished. "Don't stay away."

He gasps, his eyes wide. "You don't know what you're saying."

“Enlighten me, then,” I whisper.

Chapter 11

We sit gazing at each other, neither of us touching our food.

“You’re not celibate then?” I whisper.

I can see the amusement light up his green eyes. “No Isabella, I’m not celibate.” He pauses for this information to sink in and I flush scarlet. The mouth-to-brain filter is broken again. I can’t believe I’ve just said that out loud.

“What are your plans for the next few days?” he asks quietly.

“I’m working today, from midday… What is the time?” I panic suddenly.

“It’s just after ten, you’ve plenty of time. What about tomorrow?” He has his elbows on the table and his chin is resting on his long, steepled fingers.

“Rose and I are going to start packing. We’re moving to Seattle next weekend and I’m working at Newton’s all this week.”

“You have a place in Seattle already?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“I can’t remember the address. It’s in the Pike Market District.”

“That’s not far from me.” His lips twitch up in a half smile. “So what are you going to do for work in Seattle?”

Where is he going with all these questions? The Edward Cullen Inquisition… It's almost as bad as the Rosalie Hale Inquisition.

“I’ve applied for some internships. I’m waiting to hear.”

“Have you applied to my company, as I suggested?”

I flush… *of course not.*

“Err… no.”

"And what's wrong with my company?"

"Your company or your Company?" I smirk at him.

He smiles slightly.

"Are you smirking at me Miss Swan?"

He cocks his head to one side and I think he looks amused, but it's hard to tell. I flush, and glance down at my unfinished breakfast. I can't look him in the eye when he uses that tone of voice.

"I'd like to bite that lip," he whispers darkly.

Oh my… I am completely unaware that I am chewing my bottom lip. My mouth pops open as I gasp and swallow at the same time. That has to be the sexiest thing anybody has ever said to me. My heart beat spikes, and I think I'm panting. Jeez, I'm a quivering, moist, mess and he hasn't even touched me. I squirm in my seat and meet his dark glare.

"Well, why don't you?" I challenge, quietly.

"Because I'm not going to touch you, Isabella. Not until I have your written consent to do so." His lips hint at a smile…

What?

"What does that mean?"

"Exactly what I say…" He sighs and shakes his head at me, amused, but exasperated too. "I need to show you, Isabella. What time do you finish at your work this evening?"

"About eight."

"Well, we could go to Seattle this evening or next Saturday, come for dinner at my place, and I'll acquaint you with the facts then. The choice is yours."

"Why can't you tell me now?" Even to my own ears I sound petulant and whiny.

"Because I'm enjoying my breakfast and your company. Once you're enlightened, you probably won't want to see me again."

Holy shit… what does he mean by that? Does he white-slave small children to some God-forbidden part of the planet? Is he part of some underworld crime syndicate? It would explain why he's so rich. Is he deeply religious? Is he impotent? Surely he could prove to

me that he's not, right now. Oh my... I flush scarlet thinking about the possibilities. This is getting me nowhere. I'd like to solve the riddle that is Edward Cullen sooner rather than later. If it means that whatever secret he has is so gross that I don't want to know him any more then, quite frankly, it will be a relief. *Don't lie to yourself* – my subconscious yells at me– *it'll have to be pretty bloody bad to have you running for the hills.*

"Tonight."

He raises an eyebrow at me.

"Like Eve, you're so quick to eat from the tree of knowledge," he smirks.

"Are you smirking at me Mr. Cullen?" I ask sweetly. *Pompous ass.*

He narrows his eyes at me and picks up his Blackberry. He presses one number.

"Taylor. I'm going to need the helicopter…"

Helicopter!

"From Portland at say 20.30... No, standby at Escala… All night…"

All night!

"Yes... On call tomorrow morning… I'll pilot from Portland to Seattle. Standby pilot from 22.30."

He puts the phone down. No please or thank you.

"Do people always do what you tell them?"

"Usually, if they want to keep their jobs," he says deadpan.

"And if they don't work for you?"

"Oh, I can be very persuasive Isabella. You should finish your breakfast. And then I'll drop you home. I'll pick you up at Newton's at eight, when you finish."

I blink at him, rapidly. I have my second date with Edward oh-so-mysterious Cullen. From coffee to helicopter rides. Wow… And he wants to bite my lip… oh my… I flush at the thought.

"We'll go by helicopter to Seattle?"

"Yes"

"Why?"

He grins wickedly. "Because I can. Finish your breakfast."

How can I eat now? I'm going to Seattle by helicopter with Edward Cullen.

"Eat," he says more sharply. "Isabella, I have an issue with wasted food… Eat."

"I can't eat all this."

"Eat what's on your plate. If you'd eaten properly yesterday you wouldn't be here and I wouldn't be declaring my hand so soon." His mouth sets in a grim line. He looks angry. I frown and return to my now cold food. *I'm too excited to eat, Edward. Don't you understand?* my internal monologue explains… But I'm too much of a coward to voice these thoughts aloud, especially when he looks so, sullen…. *hmmm,* sullen Cullen. The assonance brings a smile to my face.

"What's so funny?" he snaps.

I shake my head, not daring to go there, and keep my eyes on my food which I've nearly finished. I swallow my last piece of pancake and I peek up at him. He's eyeing me speculatively.

"Good girl," he says. "I'll take you home when you've dried your hair. I don't want you getting ill." And there's some kind of unspoken promise in his words. *What does he mean?* I leave the table, wondering for a moment if I should ask permission, but dismissing the idea. Sounds like a dangerous precedent to set. I head back to his bedroom. A thought stops me.

"Where did you sleep last night?" I turn to gaze at him, still sitting in the dining room chair. I can't see any blankets or sheets out here – perhaps he's had them tidied away.

"In my bed," he says simply, his gaze impassive again.

"Oh…"

"Yes, it was quite a novelty for me too." He smiles at me.

"Not having… sex…" There – I said the word. I blush, of course.

"No." He shakes his head and frowns as if recalling something uncomfortable. "Sleeping with someone." He picks up his newspaper and continues to read.

What in heaven's name does that mean. He's never slept with anyone? I stand, staring at him in disbelief. He is the most mystifying person I've ever met. And it dawns on me, that I have slept with Edward Cullen, and I kick myself. What would I have given to be conscious, to watch him sleep. See him vulnerable. Somehow, I find that hard to imagine. Well, allegedly all will be revealed tonight. I go into his bedroom, hunt through a chest of drawers and find the hair dryer. Using my fingers, I dry my hair the best I can. When I've finished I head into the bathroom. I want to clean my teeth. I eye Edward's toothbrush… It would be like having him in my mouth. Hmmm… Glancing guiltily over my shoulder at the door and I feel the bristles on the toothbrush. They are damp. He must have used it already. I quickly grab it, squirt some toothpaste on it and brush my teeth in double quick time… I feel so naughty. It's such a thrill. Grabbing my t-shirt, bra, and panties from yesterday, I put them in the shopping bag that Taylor brought and head back to the living area to hunt for my bag and jacket. Deep joy… there is a hair tie in my bag. Edward is watching me as I tie my hair into a ponytail, his expression unreadable. I can feel his eyes follow me as I sit down and wait for him to finish. He's on his BlackBerry talking to someone.

"They want two? …. How much will that cost? ... Okay, and what safety measures do we have in place? … And they'll go via Suez? … How safe is Ben Sudan? ... And when do they arrive in Darfur? ... Okay, let's do it. Keep me abreast of progress." He hangs up.

"Ready to go?"

I nod. I wonder what his conversation was about.

He grabs what I can now see is a navy pin-striped jacket and his car keys, and he heads for the door.

"After you Miss Swan," he murmurs, opening the door for me. He looks so casually elegant. I pause, fractionally too long, drinking in the sight of him… oh my… And I slept with him last night, after all the tequila and the throwing up... And he's still here, and he wants to take me to Seattle, I just don't understand what he sees in me. I head out the door recalling his words – *I'm drawn to you* – Well, the feeling is entirely mutual Mr. Cullen, I think, as we both walk in silence down the corridor towards the elevator. As we wait I peek up at him through my lashes and he looks out of the corner of his eyes down at me. I smile and his lips twitch.

The elevator arrives and we step in. We're alone, and suddenly for some inexplicable reason, possibly our proximity in such an enclosed space, the atmosphere between us changes, charging with an electric, exhilarating anticipation. My breathing alters. His head turns fractionally toward me, his eyes darkest jade. I bite my lip.

"Oh, fuck the paperwork," he growls and he lunges at me, pushing me against the wall of the elevator and before I know it, he's got both of my hands in one of his in a vice-like grip

above my head, and he's pinning me to the wall using his hips… holy shit. His other hand grabs my ponytail and he yanks down, bringing my face up and his lips are on mine. It's only just not painful. I moan into his mouth, giving his tongue an opening and he takes full advantage, his tongue expertly exploring my mouth. I have never been kissed like this. My tongue tentatively strokes his and joins his in a slow erotic dance that's all about touch and sensation, all bump and grind. He brings his hand up to grasp my chin and holds me in place. I am helpless, my hands pinned, my face held and his hips restraining me. I can feel his erection against my belly... He wants me… Edward Cullen, Greek god wants me. And I want him, here now, in the elevator.

"You are so sweet," he murmurs, each word a staccato.

The elevator stops and the doors open and he pushes away from me in the blink of an eye, leaving me hanging... Three men in business suits look at both of us and smirk as they climb on board. My heart rate is through the roof, I feel like I've run an uphill race. I want to lean over and grasp my knees, but that's just too obvious. I glance quickly up at him. He looks so cool and calm, like he's been doing the Seattle Times crossword. *How unfair,* is he totally unaffected by my presence. He glances at me out of the corner of his eye and he gently blows out a deep breath. Oh, he's affected alright, and my very small inner goddess sways in a gentle victorious samba.

The businessmen exit on the second floor. We have one more floor to travel.

"You've brushed your teeth," he says, staring at me.

"I used your toothbrush," I breathe.

His lips quirk up in a half smile.

"Oh, Isabella Swan… What am I going to do with you?"

The doors open at the first floor and he takes my hand and pulls me out.

"What is it about elevators?" he mutters, more to himself than to me. I can just about keep up with him because my wits have been thoroughly, royally, scattered all over the floor and walls of elevator three in the Heathman Hotel.

Chapter 12

Edward opens the car door for me and I climb in. It's a beast of a car. A black Mercedes SUV. He hasn't mentioned the outburst of passion that exploded in the elevator. Should I? Should we talk about it or pretend that it didn't happen? It hardly seems real, my first proper no-holds-barred kiss… As time ticks on I am assigning it mythical, Arthurian legend, Lost City of Atlantis status… it never happened, it never existed. *Perhaps I imagined it all.* No… I touch my lips… swollen from his kiss. It definitely happened. I am a changed woman. I want this man... desperately, and he wanted me… I glance at him. Edward is his usual, polite, slightly distant self.

How confusing.

He starts the engine and reverses out of his space in the parking lot. He switches on the mp3 player. The car interior is filled with the sweetest, most magical music. Two women singing…. oh wow… all my senses are in disarray, so this is doubly affecting. It sends delicious shivers up my spine. Edward pulls out on to SW Park Avenue. He drives with easy, lazy confidence… but this comes as no surprise, I would expect him to.

'What are we listening to?"

"It's the Flower Duet by Debiles. Do you like it?"

"Edward, it's sublime."

"It is isn't it?" he grins at me. And for a fleeting moment he seems his age, young, carefree… and heart-stoppingly beautiful. Is this the key to him? Music? I sit and listen to the angelic voices, teasing me, seducing me… slow, sweet and sure… wow. The song finishes.

"Can I hear that again?"

"Of course."

Edward pushes some button and the music is caressing me once again. It's a gentle, prolonged assault on my aural senses.

"So you like classical music?" I ask, hoping for a rare insight into his personal preferences.

"Oh I think my taste is quite eclectic Isabella… everything from Thomas Tallis to the Kings of Leon… it depends on my mood. You?"

“Oh… me too… though I don’t know who Thomas Tallis is…”

He turns and gazes at me briefly before his eyes are back on the road.

“I’ll play it for you sometime… he’s a sixteenth century composer. Tudor, church choral music.” Edward grins at me… “Sounds very esoteric, I know, but it’s also sublime Isabella.” He presses a button and the Kings of Leon start singing. Hmmm… this I know. *Sex on Fire… how appropriate.* The music is interrupted by the sound of a cell phone, ringing over the mp3 speakers. Edward hits a button on the steering wheel.

“Cullen,” he snaps.

He’s so brusque.

“Mr Cullen it’s Jenks here. I have the information you require.” A nasal, slightly rasping disembodied voice comes over the speakers.

“Good. Email it to me. Anything to add?”

“No Sir.”

He presses the button and the call ceases… and the music is back. No goodbye or thanks… I’m so glad I don’t work for him. I never seriously entertained the thought of working as an intern in his company. I shiver at the thought. He’s just too…. controlling and cold with the people who work for him. The music cuts off again for the phone.

“Cullen.”

“The NDA has been emailed to you Mr Cullen.” A woman’s voice.

“Good. That’s all Angela.”

“Good day sir.”

Edward hangs the phone up by pressing a button on the steering wheel. The music is on very briefly when the phone rings again. Holy Crow, is this his life… constant nagging phone calls.

“Cullen,” he snaps.

“Hi Edward, d’you get laid?”

“Hello Emmett – I’m on Speaker phone and I’m not alone in the car.” Edward sighs loudly.

"Who's with you?"

Edward rolls his eyes. "Isabella Swan."

"Hi Bella!"

Bella!

"Hello Emmett."

"Heard a lot about you…" Emmett murmurs huskily. Edward frowns.

"Oh… don't believe a word Rose says."

Emmett laughs

"I'm dropping Isabella off now." Edward emphasizes my name. "Shall I pick you up?"

"Sure."

"See you shortly." Edward hangs up and the music is back.

"Why do you insist on calling me Isabella?"

"Because it's your name."

"I prefer Bella."

"Do you now..?" he murmurs.

We are almost at my apartment. It's not taken long.

"Isabella," he muses.

I scowl at him but he ignores my expression.

"What happened in the elevator - it won't happen again…. well, not unless it's premeditated." He pulls up outside my duplex. I belatedly realise he's not asked me where I live - yet he knows. But then he sent the books, of course he knows where I live… what able, cell-phone-tracking, helicopter owning, stalker wouldn't. Why won't he kiss me again…? I pout briefly at the thought. I don't understand… honestly his surname should be Cryptic, not Cullen. He climbs out of the car walking with easy long-legged grace round to my side to open the door, ever the gentleman - except perhaps in rare, precious moments in elevators. I flush at the memory of his mouth on mine… and the thought that I'd been

unable to touch him enters my mind. I want to run my fingers through his decadent, untidy hair… but I'd been unable to move my hands. I am retrospectively frustrated.

"I liked what happened in the elevator," I say quietly as I climb out of the car. I'm not sure if I hear an audible gasp, but I choose to ignore it and head up the steps to the front door.

Rose and Emmett are sitting at our dining table. The fourteen-thousand-dollar books have disappeared. Thank heavens. I have plans for them. She has the most un-Rose ridiculous grin on her face, and she looks mussed up in a sexy kind of way… Edward follows me into the living area, and in spite of her I've-been-having-a- good-time-all-night grin, Rose eyes him suspiciously.

"Hi Bella." She leaps up to hug me, very tightly. She holds me away from herself, at arms' length, so she can really, really examine me. She frowns slightly and turns to Edward.

"Good morning Edward," she says warily, slightly accusatory.

"Miss Hale…" he says in his stiff formal way.

"Edward, her name is Rose," Emmett grumbles at him.

"Rose." Edward nods politely at her and glares at Emmett who grins and gets up to hug me too.

"Hi Bella," he smiles a huge babyfaced smile at me, his blue eyes twinkling, and I like him immediately. He's obviously nothing like Edward… but then they're adopted brothers.

"Hi Emmett," I smile at him, and I'm aware that I'm biting my lip.

"Emmett, we'd better go." Edward says mildly.

"Sure." He turns to Rose and pulls her into his arms and gives her a long lingering kiss. *Jeez… get a room.* I stare at my feet, embarrassed. I glance up at Edward and he's watching me intently. I narrow my eyes at him. Why can't you kiss me like that? Freely, in front of an audience… I wonder.

Emmett continues to kiss Rose sweeping her off her feet and dipping her in a dramatic hold so that her hair touches the ground as he kisses her… hard.

"Laters, Baby," he grins.

Rose just melts – I've never seen her melt before – the words comely and compliant come to mind… compliant Rose… boy Emmett must be good. Edward rolls his eyes and stares down at me, his expression unreadable, although maybe he's mildly amused. He tucks a

stray strand of my hair that has worked its way free from my ponytail, behind my ear. My breath hitches at the contact… and I lean my head slightly into his fingers… His eyes soften and he runs his thumb across my lower lip… *oh my*, my blood sears in my veins. And all too quickly his touch is gone.

"Laters, Baby…" he murmurs to me… and I have to laugh because it's so un-Edward and even though I know he's being irreverent the endearment tugs at something deep inside me. "I'll pick you up at eight." He turns to leave opening the front door and stepping out on to the porch. Emmett follows him to the car but turns and blows Rose another kiss…*exuberant or what*.

"So… did you?" Rose asks as we watch them climb into the car and drive off. I can hear the burning curiosity in her voice.

"No," I snap irritably, hoping that will halt the questions. We head back into the house. "You obviously did, though." I can't contain the tiny bit of envy in my voice. Rose always manages to ensnare men… she is irresistible, beautiful, sexy, funny, forward… all the things that I am not. But her answering grin is infectious…

"And I'm seeing him again this evening." She claps her hands and jumps up and down like a small child. She can hardly contain her excitement and happiness and I can't help but feel happy for her. A happy Rose… this is going to be interesting.

"Edward is taking me to Seattle this evening."

"Seattle?"

"Yes."

"Maybe you will *then*...?"

"Oh Rose I hope so…"

"You like him then?"

"Yes."

"Like him enough to…"

"Yes."

She raises her eyebrows. "Wow… Bella Swan, finally falling for a man, and it's Edward Cullen – hot sexy billionaire."

“Oh yeah – it’s all about the money.” I smirk at her and we both fall into a fit of giggles.

“Is that a new blouse?” she asks and I finally let her have all the unexciting details about my night…

“Has he kissed you yet?” she asks as she makes coffee.

I blush.

“Once.”

“Once!” she scoffs.

I nod… rather shame faced. “He’s very reserved.”

She frowns. “That’s odd.”

“I don’t think odd covers it really…” I murmur.

“Well, we need to make sure you’re simply irresistible for this evening.” *Oh no*… this sounds like it will be time consuming and possibly humiliating.

“I have to be at work in an hour.”

“I can work with that timeframe. Come.” Rose grabs my hand and takes me into her bedroom...

The day drags at Newton’s even though we are busy. Because we’ve hit the summer season I have to spend two hours restocking the shelves once the shop is closed. It’s mindless work and it gives me too long to think. I’ve not really had a chance all day. Under Rose’s tireless and frankly intrusive instruction my legs and underarms are shaved to perfection and my eyebrows plucked and I am buffed all over… it was most unpleasant. But she assures me that this is what men expect these days… What else will he expect? I have to convince Rose that this is what I want to do… for some reason she doesn’t trust him. Maybe because he’s so stiff and formal… she says she can’t put her finger on it, but I have promised to text her when I arrive in Seattle. I haven’t told her about the helicopter… she’d freak.

I also have the Jacob issue. He’s left three messages and I have seven missed calls on my cell from him. He’s also called home twice. Rose has been very vague as to where I am. He’ll know she’s covering for me. Rose doesn’t do vague. But I have decided to let him stew. I don’t know what I’m going to say to him.

Edward mentioned some kind of written paperwork and I don't know if he was joking or if I'm going to have to sign something… it's so frustrating trying to guess. And on top of all the angst, I can barely contain my excitement or my nerves… tonight's the night… After all this time… am I ready for this? My subconscious glares at me tapping her small foot impatiently… she's been ready for this for years… and I think I'd be ready for anything with Edward Cullen, but I still don't understand what he sees in me… mousey Bella Swan - it makes no sense.

He is punctual, of course, and is waiting for me when I leave Newton's. He climbs out of the back of the Mercedes to open the door and smiles warmly at me.

"Good evening Miss Swan," he says.

"Mr Cullen." I nod politely to him as I climb into the backseat of the car.

Taylor is sitting in the driver's seat.

"Hello Taylor," I say softly.

"Good evening Miss Swan," his voice is polite and professional.

Edward climbs in the other side and clasps my hand and gives it a gentle squeeze. A squeeze I feel all the way though my body.

"How was work?" he asks gently.

"Overlong." I reply and my voice is husky, too low and full of need.

"Yes, it's been a long day for me too," his tone is serious.

"What did you do?" I manage.

"I went hiking with Emmett." His thumb strokes my knuckles, back and forth and my heart skips a beat as my breathing accelerates. How does he do this to me? He's only touching me in a very small area of my body… and the hormones are flying.

The drive to the heliport is short and before I know it we arrive. I wonder briefly where the fabled helicopter might be… we seem to be in a built-up area of the city and even I know helicopters need a substantial amount of space to take off and land. Taylor parks up and gets out of the car and opens my car door. Edward is beside me in an instant and takes my hand again.

"Ready?" he asks.

I nod… and want to say *for anything*… but I can't get the words out as I am too nervous, too excited.

"Taylor." He nods curtly at his driver and we head into the building. Edward goes straight to a set of elevators. *Elevator!*The memory of our kiss this morning comes back to haunt me… actually I have been thinking about this all day. Daydreaming at the till at Newton's. Twice Mr Newton had to shout my name to bring me back to Earth. To say I've been distracted would be the understatement of the year. Edward glances down at me, a slight smile on his lips… Ha! – he's thinking about it too.

"It's only three floors…" he says dryly. "And it's a very quick ride." His green eyes are dancing with amusement.

He's telepathic surely. It's spooky. I try very hard to keep my face impassive as we enter the lift. The doors close… and it's there… the weird electrical attraction crackling between us, pulling at me. I close my eyes in a vain attempt to ignore it. He tightens his grip on my hand, and he's right - five seconds later the doors open on to the roof of the building and there it is – a white helicopter with the name Cullen Enterprise Holdings Inc written in blue with the company logo on the side. *Surely this is misuse of Company property.*

He leads me to a small office where an old timer sits behind the desk.

"Here's you flight plan Mr Cullen. All external checks done. It's ready and waiting sir. You're free to go."

"Thank you Joe." Edward smiles warmly at him. Someone deserving of the polite treatment from Edward, perhaps he's not an employee… I stare at the old guy in awe.

"Let's go," he says to me and we make our way towards the helicopter. When we're up close it's much bigger than I thought. I expected it to be a roadster version just for two, but it has several seats… at least seven. Edward opens the door and directs me to one of the seats at the very front.

"Sit – don't touch anything," he orders as he clambers in behind me. He shuts the door with a slam. I'm glad that the area is floodlit otherwise I'd find it difficult to see inside the small cockpit. I sit down in my allotted seat and he crouches beside me to strap me into the harness. It's a four-point harness with all the straps connecting to one central buckle. He tightens both of the upper straps, so I can hardly move. He's so close, and intent on what he's doing. If I could only lean forward, my nose would be in his hair… he smells, clean, fresh, heavenly, but I'm fastened securely into my seat and effectively immobile. He glances up at me and smiles, like he's enjoying his usual private joke, his green eyes heated… he's so tantalizingly close. I'm holding my breath. He pulls at one of the upper straps.

“You’re secure… no escaping,” he whispers and his eyes are scorching. “Breathe, Isabella,” he adds softly, and he reaches up and gently caresses my cheek, running his long fingers down to my chin, which he grasps between his thumb and forefinger. He leans forward and plants a brief, chaste kiss on my lips. I am left reeling… my insides clenching at the thrilling, unexpected touch of his lips. "I like this harness..." he whispers.

What! He sits in the seat beside me and starts buckling himself up.

He begins a protracted procedure of checking gauges and flipping switches and buttons from the mind-boggling array of dials and lights and switches in front of me. Little lights wink and flash from various dials and the whole of the instrument panel lights up.

“Put your cans on,” he says pointing to a set of headphones in front of me. I pop them on and the rotor blades start. They are deafening. He puts his headphones on and continues flipping various switches.

“I’m just going through all the pre-flight checks.”

Edward’s disembodied voice is in my ears through the headphones. I turn and grin at him.

“Do know what you are doing?” I ask.

He turns and smiles at me.

“Oh… I’ve been a fully qualified pilot for four years, Isabella… you’re safe with me.” He gives me a wolfish grin. “Well, while we’re flying,” he adds and winks at me. *Winking… Edward!*

“Are you ready?”

I nod wide eyed.

“Okay… tower… PDX this is Echo Charlie – Charlie, Hotel Echo, cleared for take off to Escala via Sea Tac. Please confirm, over.”

“Echo Charlie - you are clear. PDX to call, proceed to 10,000 feet, heading NW 35 degrees. Air speed 155, over. ”

“Roger tower, Echo Charlie set, over and out…. here we go,” he adds to me and the helicopter rises slowly and smoothly into the air.

Chapter 13

Oh my… Portland disappears in front of me as we head into WA airspace, though my stomach remains firmly in Oregon. All the bright lights shrink until they are twinkling sweetly below us. It's like looking out from inside a fish bowl. Once we're higher, there really is nothing to see. It's pitch black, not even the moon to shed any light on our journey. How can he see where we're going?

"Eerie, isn't it?" Edward's voice is in my ears.

"How do you know you're going the right way?"

"Here." He points his long index finger at one of the gauges, and it shows an electronic compass. "There's a helipad on top of the building I live in. That's where we're going."

Of course there's a helipad where he lives. I am so out of my league here. His face is lit up from the lights of the instrument panel. He's concentrating hard and he's continually glancing at the various dials in front of him. He has a beautiful profile. Aquiline nose, square jawed. I'd like to run my tongue along his jaw… he hasn't shaved, his stubble makes the prospect doubly tempting. Hmmm… I'd like to feel how rough it is beneath my tongue, my fingers, against my face.

"When you fly at night, you fly blind. You have to trust the instrumentation." He interrupts my erotic reverie.

"How long will the flight be?" I manage breathlessly. I wasn't thinking about sex at all. No, no way…

"Less than an hour. The wind is in our favor."

Hmmm, less than an hour to Seattle. That's not bad going, no wonder we're flying.

I have less than an hour before the big reveal. All the muscles clench deep in my belly. *Oh my…* I have a serious case of butterflies. They are flourishing in my stomach. Holy shit, what has he got in store for me?

"You okay, Isabella?"

"Yes." My answer is short, clipped, squeezed out through my nerves.

I think he smiles, but it's difficult to tell in the darkness. Edward flicks yet another switch. "PDX, this is Echo Charlie now at 10,000 feet, over."

He exchanges information with air traffic control. It all sounds very professional to me. I think we're moving from Portland's air space to Seattle International airports.

“Understood Sea Tac, standing by over and out.”

“Look, over there.” He points towards a small pin-point of light in the far distance. “That’s Seattle.”

“Do you always impress women this way? Come and fly in my helicopter,” I ask, genuinely interested.

“I’ve never bought a girl up here, Isabella. It’s another first for me.” His voice is quiet, serious.

Oh… that was an unexpected answer. Another first? Oh, the sleeping thing, perhaps?

“Are you impressed?”

“I’m awed, Edward.”

He smiles. “Awed?” And for a brief moment, he’s his age again... almost... happy.

I nod, “You’re just so, competent…”

“Why thank you, Miss Swan,” he says politely, and I think he’s pleased, but I’m not sure.

We ride into the dark night in silence for a while. The bright spot that is Seattle is slowly getting bigger.

“Sea Tac tower to Echo Charlie. Flight plan to Escala in place. Please proceed. And standby. Over.”

“This is Echo Charlie, understood Sea Tac. Standing by, over and out.”

“You obviously enjoy this,” I murmur.

“What?” He glances at me. He looks quizzical in the half-light of the instruments.

“Flying,” I reply.

“It requires control and concentration. How could I not love it? Though my favorite is soaring.”

“Soaring?”

"Yes. Gliding, to the lay person. Gliders and helicopters – I fly them both."

"Oh." Expensive hobbies. I remember him telling me during the interview. Hmmm, I like reading and occasionally going to the movies. I am out of my depth here.

"Echo Charlie, come in please, over."

"Echo Charlie here, Sea Tac, over."

"Echo Charlie, descend to 5,000 feet over and stand by."

Seattle is getting closer. We are on the very outskirts now. It looks absolutely stunning. Seattle at night, from the sky...*Wow!*

"Looks good, doesn't it?" Edward murmurs.

I nod enthusiastically. It looks other-worldly – unreal – and I feel like I'm on a giant film set. Jake's favorite film, maybe… '*Bladerunner.'* The memory of Jake's attempted kiss comes back to haunt me. I'm beginning to feel a bit mean in not calling him back. *He can wait until tomorrow…* my subconscious wags her finger at me.

"We'll be there in a few minutes," Edward mutters and suddenly my blood is pounding in my ears, as my heartbeat accelerates and adrenaline spikes through my system. He starts talking to air traffic control again, but I am no longer listening. *Oh my*… I think I'm going to faint. My fate is in his hands.

We are now flying amongst the buildings and I can see up ahead a tall skyscraper with a helipad on top. The word Escala is painted in white on top of the building. It's getting nearer and nearer, bigger and bigger… like my anxiety. *God, I hope I don't let him down,* is all I can think. He'll find me lacking in some way. Oh, I wish I'd listened to Rose and borrowed one of her dresses, but I like my jeans, and I'm wearing the blue blouse. He liked the color. I'm gradually gripping the edge of my seat tighter and tighter. *I can do this, I can do this…* I chant this mantra as the skyscraper looms below us.

The helicopter slows and hovers and Edward sets it down on the helipad on top of the building. My heart is in my mouth and I can't work out if it's from nervous anticipation, relief that we've arrived alive or fear that I will fail in some way. He switches the ignition off and very slowly the rotor blades slow and quiet, until all I can hear is the sound of my own erratic breathing. Edward takes his headphones off, and reaches across and pulls mine off too.

"We're here," he says softly. His look is so intense. Half in shadow and half in the bright white light from the landing lights. Dark knight and white knight, a fitting metaphor for

Edward. He looks... strained. His jaw is clenched and his eyes are tight. He unbuckles his seatbelt and reaches over to unbuckle mine. His face is inches from mine.

"You don't have to do anything you don't want to do. You know that, don't you?" His tone is so earnest, desperate even, his green eyes impassioned, and it takes me completely by surprise.

"I'd never do anything I didn't want to do Edward." And as I say the words, I don't quite feel their conviction, because at this moment in time, I'd probably do anything for this man seated beside me. But this does the trick. He's mollified. He eyes me warily for a moment and somehow, even though he's so tall, he manages to ease his way gracefully to the door of the helicopter and open it. He jumps out, waiting for me to follow.

He takes my hand as I clamber down on to the helipad. It's very windy on top of the building and I'm nervous about the fact that I am standing at least sixty stories high in an unenclosed space.

Edward wraps his arm around me and holds me tightly against him.

"Come," he shouts above the noise of the wind.

He drags me over to an elevator shaft, taps a number into a keypad, and the doors open. He pulls me inside. It's warm and all mirrored glass. I can see Edward to infinity everywhere I look, and the wonderful thing is that he's holding me to infinity, too. Edward taps another code into the keypad, the doors close. Moments later, we're in an all-white foyer. In the middle is a round dark wood table, on it an unbelievably huge bunch of white flowers. On the walls, paintings, everywhere. He opens two double doors and we are in a wide corridor and directly opposite a huge room opens up. It's the main living area, double height. Huge is too small a word for it. The far wall is glass and leads on to a balcony that overlooks Seattle. To the right is an enormous 'U' shaped sofa that could probably sit ten adults comfortably. It faces a state-of-the-art stainless steel – or maybe platinum for all I know - modern fireplace. The fire is lit and flaming gently. On the left at the back, by the entryway, is the kitchen area. All white with dark wood worktops and a large breakfast bar, which seats six. Behind that, in front of the glass wall, is a dining table surrounded by sixteen chairs. And tucked in the corner is a full size shiny black grand piano. Oh yes, he probably plays the piano, too. There is art of all shapes and sizes on all the walls. In fact, this apartment looks more like a gallery than a place to live.

"Can I take your jacket?" I shake my head. I'm still cold from the wind on the helipad. "Would you like a drink?" *Is he trying to be funny*? After last night… And for one second, I think about asking for a margarita, but I don't have the nerve.

"I'm going to have a glass of white wine. Would you like to join me?"

"Yes please," I murmur. I am standing in this enormous room feeling, really, really out of place. I walk over to the glass wall and I realize that the lower half of the wall opens concertina-style on to the balcony. Seattle is lit up and lovely in the background. I walk back to the kitchen area – it takes a few seconds, it's so far from the glass wall – and Edward is opening a bottle of wine. He has taken off his jacket.

"Pouilly Fumé okay with you?"

"I know nothing about wine, Edward. I'm sure it will be fine." I say quietly. My heart is thumping. I want to run. This is seriously rich. Seriously over-the-top Bill Gates bloody wealthy. What am I doing here? *You know very well what you're doing here,* my subconscious sneers at me. Yes, I want to be in Edward Cullen's bed.

"Here." He hands me a glass of wine. Even the glasses are lovely: heavy, very modern, crystal. I take a sip and the wine is light, crisp and delicious. "You're very quiet and you're not even blushing. In fact, I think this is the palest I've ever seen you Isabella," he murmurs. "Are you hungry?"

I shake my head. Not for food.

"It's a very big place you have here."

"Big?"

"Big."

"It's big," he agrees, and I can see the amusement in his eyes.

I take another sip of wine.

"Do you play?" I point my chin at the piano.

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Yes."

"Of course you do. Is there anything you can't do well?"

"Yes… a few things." He takes a sip of his wine. He doesn't take his eyes off me. I can feel them following me as I turn and glance around this vast room. Room is the wrong word, it's not a room, it's a mission statement.

“Do you want to sit?”

I nod and he takes my hand and leads me to the large white couch. As I sit, I’m struck by the fact that I feel like Tess Durbeyfield looking at the new house that belongs to the notorious Alex D’Urberville. The thought makes me smile.

“What’s so amusing?” He sits beside me, but turned around facing me. He rests his head on his right hand, his elbow propped on the back of the couch.

I shake my head. “Why did you give me Tess of the D’Urbervilles specifically?” I ask him.

Edward stares at me for a moment. I think he’s surprised by my question.

“Well, you said you liked Thomas Hardy…”

“Is that the only reason?” And I can hear the disappointment in my voice.

He presses his mouth into a hard line.

“It seemed appropriate. I could hold you to some impossibly high ideal like Angel Clare or debase you completely like Alec D’Urberville,” he murmurs and his green eyes flash emerald at me.

“If there are only two choices, I’ll take the debasement,” I whisper gazing at him. My subconscious is staring at me in awe.

He gasps.

“Isabella stop biting your lip, please. It’s very distracting. You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

He frowns. “Yes. Would you excuse me a moment?” He disappears through a wide doorway on the far side of the room. He’s gone for a couple of minutes and comes back with some papers.

“This is non-disclosure agreement.” He shrugs and has the grace to look a little embarrassed. “My lawyer insists on it.” He hands it to me. I’m completely bemused. “If you’re going for option two, debasement, you’ll need to sign this.”

“And if I don’t want to sign anything?”

“Then it’s Angel Clare. High ideals. Well, for most of the book anyway.”

"What does this agreement mean?"

"It means you cannot disclose anything about us. Anything, to anyone."

I stare at him in disbelief. Holy crow… it's bad. Really bad. And now I'm really, very curious to know.

"Okay. I'll sign."

He hands me a pen.

"Aren't you even going to read it?"

"No."

He frowns at me. "Isabella, you should always read anything you sign." His tone is castigating.

"Edward, what you fail to understand is that I wouldn't talk about us to anyone anyway, even Rose, so it's immaterial to me whether I sign an agreement or not. If it means so much to you, or your lawyer, whom *you* obviously talk to, then fine. I'll sign."

He gazes down at me and he nods gravely. "Fair point well made, Miss Swan."

I lavishly sign on the dotted line of both copies and hand one back to him. Folding the other, I place it my satchel and take a large swig of my wine. I'm sounding so much braver than I'm actually feeling.

"Does this mean you're going to make love to me tonight, Edward?"

His mouth drops open slightly, but he recovers quickly.

"No Isabella, it doesn't. Firstly, I don't make love. I fuck… hard. Secondly, there's a lot more paperwork to do. And thirdly, you don't yet know what you're in for and you could still run for the hills. Come. I want to show you my playroom."

My mouth drops open. Fuck… Hard. Holy shit. That sounds so… hot. But why are we looking at a playroom? I am mystified.

"You want to play on your Xbox?" I ask.

He laughs… loudly. "No Isabella, no Xbox, no Playstation… come." He stands and holds out his hand. I let him lead me back out to the corridor. On the right of the double doors where we came in, another door leads to a staircase. We go up to the second floor and turn

right. Producing a key from his pocket, he unlocks yet another door, and takes a deep breath.

“You can leave anytime. The helicopter is on stand-by to take you whenever you want to go. You can stay the night and go home in the morning. It’s fine, okay, whatever you decide.”

“Just open the damn door, Edward.”

He opens the door and stands back to let me in. I gaze at him once more. I so want to know what’s in here. I take a deep breath and walk in.

And it feels like I’ve time-traveled back to the sixteenth century and the Spanish Inquisition.

Holy Fuck.

Chapter 14

The first thing I notice is the smell: leather, wood, polish with a faint citrus scent, it's really very pleasant. The lighting is soft, subtle. In fact, I can't see the source but it's around the cornice in the room, emitting an ambient glow. The walls and ceiling are a deep, dark burgundy, giving a womb-like effect to such a large room and the floor is old, old varnished wood. There is a large wooden cross like an X fastened to the wall facing the door. It's of high-polished mahogany and there are restraining cuffs on each corner. Above it is an expansive iron grid, suspended from the ceiling, eight-foot square at least, and from it hang all manner of ropes, chains, and glinting shackles. By the door, two long, polished, ornately carved poles, like spindles from a banister but longer, hang like curtain rods across the wall. From them swings a startling assortment of paddles, whips, riding crops, and funny-looking feathery things.

Beside the door stands a substantial mahogany chest of drawers. Each drawer is slim, as if designed to contain specimens in a crusty old museum. I wonder briefly what the drawers actually *do* hold. *Do I want to know?* In the far corner is an oxblood leather padded bench, and fixed to the wall beside it, a wooden, polished rack that looks like a pool or billiard cue holder, but on closer inspection it holds canes of varying lengths and widths. There's a stout six-foot-long table in the opposite corner, polished wood with intricately carved legs, and two matching stools underneath.

But what dominates the room is a bed. It's bigger than king-size, an ornately carved Rococo four-poster with a flat top. It looks late nineteenth century. Under the canopy I can see more gleaming chains and cuffs. There is no bedding, just a mattress covered in red leather, and red satin cushions piled at one end.

At the foot of the bed, set apart a few feet, is a large oxblood chesterfield couch… just stuck, in the middle of the room, facing the bed. An odd arrangement, to have a couch facing the bed, and I smile to myself. I've picked on the couch as odd, when really it's the most mundane piece of furniture in the room. I glance up, then stare, at the ceiling. There are karabiners all over the ceiling at odd intervals. I vaguely wonder what they're for. *Hmmm…*

Weirdly, all the wood, the dark walls, the moody lighting and the oxblood leather makes the room kind of soft and romantic, but I know it's anything but. This is Edward's version of soft and romantic.

I turn and he's watching me intently, as I knew he would be, his expression completely unreadable. I walk further into the room and he follows me. The feathery thing has me intrigued. I touch it hesitantly. It's suede, like a small cat-of-nine-tails but bushier, and there are very small plastic beads on the end.

“It’s called a flogger.” Edward’s voice is quiet and soft.

A flogger… hmmm. I think I’m in shock. My subconscious has emigrated or been struck dumb or simply keeled over and expired. I feel… quite numb. I can observe, absorb but not articulate my feelings about all this, because I don’t know what my feelings are about this. What is the appropriate response to finding out a potential lover is a complete freaky sadist or masochist? *Fear*… Yes, that seems to be the over-riding feeling. I recognize it now. But weirdly, not of him. I don’t think he’d hurt me, well, not without my consent. So many questions cloud my mind. Why? How? When? How often? Who? I walk to the bed and run my hands down one of the intricately carved posts. The post is very sturdy, the craftsmanship outstanding.

“Say something,” Edward commands quietly.

“Do you do this to people or do they do it to you?”

His mouth quirks up slightly. “People?” He blinks a couple of times as he considers his answer. “I do this to women who want me to.”

I don’t understand. “If you have willing volunteers, why am I here?”

“Because I want to do this with you… very much.”

“Oh…” I gasp. *Why?*

I wander to the far corner of the room, pat the waist high padded bench and run my fingers over the leather. *He likes to hurt women*. The thought depresses me.

“You’re a sadist?”

“No, Isabella I’m not. I’m a dominant.” His eyes are blazing green, intense.

“What does that mean?” I whisper.

“It means I want you to willingly surrender yourself to me. Tn all things.”

I frown at him as I try to assimilate this idea.

“Why would I do that?”

“To please me,” he whispers and cocks his head to one side and I see a ghost of a smile.

Please him! He wants me to please him! I think my mouth drops open. *Please, Edward Cullen...* And I realise in that moment that yes, that's exactly what I want to do. I want him to be bloody delighted with me. It's a revelation.

"In very simple terms, I want you to want to please me," he says softly.

His voice is hypnotic.

"How do I do that?" My mouth is dry and I wish I had more wine. Okay, I understand the pleasing bit, but I am really puzzled by the soft-boudoir-Victorian-torture set up. Do I want to know the answer?

"I have rules and I want you to comply with them. They are for your benefit and for my pleasure. If you follow these rules to my satisfaction, I shall reward you. If you don't, I shall punish you, and you will learn," he whispers. I glance at the rack of canes as he says this.

"And where does all this fit in?" I wave my hand in the general direction of the room.

"It's all part of the incentive package… Both reward and punishment."

"So you'll get your kicks by exerting your will over me."

"It's about gaining your trust and your respect, so you'll let me exert my will over you. I will gain a great deal of pleasure, joy even, in your submission. The more you submit, the greater my joy – it's a very simple equation."

"Okay, and what do I get out of this?"

He shrugs and looks almost apologetic. "Me," he says simply.

Oh my…

Edward rakes his hand through his hair as he gazes at me.

"I can't tell what you're thinking. It's driving me crazy. Let's go back downstairs where I can concentrate better. It's very… distracting, having you in here."

He holds his hand out to me and now I'm hesitant to take it. Rose had said he was dangerous, she was so right. *How did she know?* He's dangerous to my health, because I know I'm going to say yes. And part of me doesn't want to. Part of me wants to run screaming from this room and all it represents. I am so out of my depth here.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Isabella.” His green eyes implore and I know he speaks the truth. I take his hand and he leads me out of the door.

“If you do this… let me show you.” Rather than going back downstairs, he turns right out of the *playroom* as he calls it, and down a corridor. We pass several doors until we reach the one at the end. Beyond it is a bedroom with a large double bed, all in white, everything - furniture, walls, bedding. Sterile, cold, but with the most glorious view of Seattle through the glass wall.

“This will be your room. You can decorate it how you like, have whatever you like in here.”

“My room? You’re expecting me to move in?” I can’t hide the horror in my voice.

“Not full time, just say, Friday evening through Sunday. We have to talk about all that, negotiate. If you want to do this,” he adds, his voice quiet and hesitant.

“I’ll sleep here?”

“Yes.”

“Not with you.”

“No. I told you, I don’t sleep with anyone. Except you, when you’re stupefied with drink.” His eyes are reprimanding. I feel my mouth press in a hard line. This is what I cannot reconcile: kind, caring Edward, who rescues me from inebriation and holds me gently whilst I’m throwing up into the azaleas, and the monster who possesses whips and chains in a special room.

“Where do you sleep?”

“My room is downstairs. Come. You must be hungry.”

“Funnily enough, I seem to have lost my appetite,” I murmur petulantly.

“You must eat, Isabella,” he admonishes and taking my hand leads me back downstairs.

Back in the impossibly big room I am filled with deep trepidation. I am on the edge of a precipice and I have to decide whether or not to jump.

“I’m fully aware that this is a dark path I’m leading you down, Isabella, which is why I really want you to think about this. You must have some questions,” he says gently as he wanders into the kitchen area, releasing my hand. *I do… But where to start?* “You’ve signed your NDA. You can ask me anything you want, and I’ll answer.”

I stand at the breakfast bar watching him as he opens the refrigerator and pulls out a plate of different cheeses with two large bunches of green and red grapes. He sets the plate down on the worktop and proceeds to cut up a French baguette.

"Sit." He points to one of the bar stools at the breakfast bar and I obey his command. If I'm going to do this, I'm going to have to get used to it, and I realize he's been this bossy since I met him.

"You mentioned paperwork."

"Yes."

"What paperwork?"

"Well apart from the NDA, a contract – saying what we will and won't do. I need to know your limits and you need to know mine. This is consensual, Isabella."

"And if I don't want to do this?"

"That's fine," he says carefully.

"But we won't have any sort of relationship."

"No."

"Why?"

"This is the only sort of relationship I can have."

"Why?"

He shrugs. "It's the way I am."

"How did you become this way?"

"Why is anyone the way they are? That's kind of hard to answer. Why do some people like cheese and other people hate it? Do you like cheese, incidentally? Mrs Cope, my housekeeper, has left this for supper." He takes some large white plates from a cupboard and places one in front of me.

We're talking about cheese… Holy crow.

"What are your rules that I have to follow?"

"I have them written down. We'll go through them when we've eaten."

Food. How can I eat now?

"I'm really not hungry," I whisper.

"You will eat," he says simply. *Dominating Edward, it all becomes clear*. "Would you like another glass of wine?"

"Yes, please."

He pours wine into my glass and comes to sit beside me. I take a hasty sip.

"Help yourself to food, Isabella."

I take a small bunch of grapes. This, I can manage. He narrows his eyes at me.

"Have you been like this for a while?" I ask.

"Yes."

"Is it easy to find… women who want to do this?"

He raises an eyebrow at me. "You'd be amazed," he says dryly.

"Then why me? I really don't understand."

"Isabella, I've told you. I'm drawn to you." He smiles ironically. "Like a moth to a flame." His voice darkens. "I want you very badly. Especially now, when you're biting your lip again." He takes a deep breath and swallows.

My stomach somersaults. Ge wants me. In a weird way, true, but this beautiful, strange, kinky man wants me.

"I think you have that cliché the wrong way round," I grumble. I am the moth and he is the flame. And I'm going to get burnt. I know.

"Eat!"

"No. I haven't signed anything yet, so I think I'll hang on to my free will for a bit longer, if that's okay with you."

His eyes soften and his lips turn up in a smile.

soNormal" style="margin-bottom:12.0pt;mso-pagination:none;mso-layout-grid-align:none;text-autospace:none">“As you wish, Miss Swan.”

“How many women?” I blurt out the question, but I’m just so curious.

“Fifteen.”

Oh… not as many as I thought.

“For long periods of time?”

“Some of them, yes.”

“Have you ever hurt anyone?”

“Yes.”

*Holy Shit. “*Badly?”

“No.”

“Will you hurt me?”

“What do you mean?”

“Physically, will you hurt me?”

“I will punish you when you require it, and it will be painful.”

I think I feel a little faint. I take another sip of wine. Alcohol, this will make me brave.

“Have you ever been beaten?”

“Yes.”

Oh. That surprises me, and before I can question him on this revelation further, he interrupts my train of thought.

“Let’s discuss this in my study. I want to show you something.”

This is so hard to process. Here I was foolishly thinking that I’d spend a night of unparalleled passion in this man’s bed and we’re negotiating this weird arrangement.

I follow him into his study, a spacious room with another floor-to-ceiling window that opens out on to the balcony. He sits on the desk, motions for me to sit on a leather chair in front of him, and hands me a piece of paper.

"These are the rules. They may be subject to change. They form part of the contract, which you can also have. Read these rules and let's discuss."

RULES

Obedience: The Submissive will obey any instructions given by The Dominant immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant, excepting those activities which are outlined in hard limits (Appendix 2). She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

Sleep: The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of eight hours sleep a night when she is not with The Dominant.

Food: The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and wellbeing from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix 4). The Submissive will not snack between meals, with the exception of fruit.

Clothes: During the Term, the Submissive will wear clothing only approved by The Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for The Submissive, which The Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires, the Submissive shall during the Term wear any adornments the Dominant shall require, in the presence of the Dominant and any other time the Dominant deems fit.

Exercise: The Dominant shall provide The Submissive with a personal trainer four times a week in hour-long sessions at times to be mutually agreed between the personal trainer and The Submissive. The personal trainer will report to The Dominant on The Submissive's progress.

Personal Hygiene/Beauty: The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of The Dominant's choosing at times to be decided by The Dominant, and undergo whatever treatments The Dominant sees fit.

Personal Safety: The Submissive will not drink to excess, smoke, take recreational drugs, or put herself in any unnecessary danger.

Personal Qualities: The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relations with anyone other than The Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself in a respectful and modest manner at all times. She must recognize that her behaviour is a direct reflection on The

Dominant. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds, wrongdoings, and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above will be result in immediate punishment, the nature of which shall be determined by The Dominant.

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Holy Fuck.

“Hard limits?” I ask.

“Yes, what you won’t do, what I won’t do. We need to specify in our agreement.”

“I’m not sure about accepting money for clothes. It feels wrong.” I shift uncomfortably, the word "ho" rattling round my head.

“I want to lavish money on you. Let me buy you some clothes. I may need you to accompany me to functions, and I want you dressed well. I’m sure your salary, when you do get a job, won’t cover the kind of clothes I’d like you to wear.”

“I don’t have to wear them when I’m not with you?”

“No.”

“Okay.” *Think of them as uniform…*

“I don’t want to exercise four times a week.”

“Isabella, I need you supple, strong, and with stamina. Trust me… You need to exercise.”

“But surely not four times a week. How about three?”

“I want you to do four.”

“I thought this was a negotiation?”

He purses his lips at me. “Okay, Miss Swan, another point well made. How about an hour on three days and one day half an hour?”

“Three days, three hours. I get the impression you’re going to keep me exercised when I’m here…”

He smiles wickedly. “Yes, I am. Okay, agreed. Are you sure you don’t want to intern at my company? You’re a good negotiator.”

“No, I don’t think that’s a good idea.” I stare down at his rules. W*axing… Waxing what? Everything? Ugh.*

“So, limits. These are mine.” He hands me another piece of paper.

Hard Limits

No acts involving fire play

No acts involving urination or defecation and the products thereof

No acts involving needles, knives, piercing, or blood

No acts involving children or animals

No acts that will leave any permanent marks on the skin

No acts involving breath control

Ugh, he has to write these down! Of course, they all look very sensible, and frankly, necessary. Any sane person wouldn’t want to be involved in this sort of thing, surely? Though I now feel a little queasy.

“Is there anything you’d like to add?” he asks kindly.

Holy Crap. I’ve no idea. I am completely stumped. He gazes at me, and furrows his brow.

“Is there anything you won’t do?”

“I don’t know.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?”

I squirm uncomfortably and bite my lip. “I’ve never done anything like this…”

“Well, when you’ve had sex, was there anything that you didn’t like doing?”

For the first time in what seems to be ages, I blush.

“You can tell me, Isabella. We have to be honest with each other or this isn’t going to work.”

I squirm uncomfortably again and stare at my knotted fingers.

“Tell me,” he commands.

“Well… I’ve not had sex before, so I don’t know.”

I peek up at him and he’s staring at me, mouth-open, frozen and pale. Really pale.

“Never?” he whispers.

I shake my head.

“You’re a virgin?” he breathes.

I nod, flushing again.

He closes his eyes and looks to be counting to ten. When he opens them again, he’s angry. He glares at me.

“Why the fuck didn’t you tell me?” he growls.

Chapter 15

Edward is running both his hands through his hair and pacing up and down his study. Two hands… that's double exasperation. His usual concrete control seems to have slipped a notch.

"I don't understand why you didn't tell me," he castigates me.

"The subject never came up. I'm not in the habit of revealing my sexual status to everybody I meet. I mean, we hardly know each other." I'm staring at my hands. Why am I feeling guilty? Why is he so mad? I peek up at him.

"Well, you know a lot more about me now." He snaps, his mouth presses into a hard line. "I knew you were inexperienced… but a *virgin…!*" He says it like it's a really dirty word. "Hell, Bella, I just showed you…" he groans. "May God forgive me… Have you ever been kissed, apart from by me?"

"Of course I have." I try my best to look affronted. *Okay… maybe twice…*

"And a nice young man hasn't swept you off your feet? I just don't understand… You're twenty-one, nearly twenty-two. You're beautiful." He runs his hand through his hair again.

Beautiful… I flush with pleasure. Edward thinks I'm beautiful. I knot my fingers together staring at them hard, trying to conceal my goofy grin. *Perhaps he's near- sighted…* my sub-conscious has reared her somnambulant head… where were you when I needed you?

"And you're seriously discussing what I want to do, when you have no experience…" His brows knit together. "How have you avoided sex? Tell me, please."

I shrug. "No one's really… you know." Come up to scratch… only you. And you turn out to be some kind of … monster. "Why are you so angry with me?" I whisper.

"I'm not angry with you, I'm angry at myself. I just assumed…"

He looks at me shrewdly and then shakes his head.

"Do you want to go?" he asks gently.

"No… unless you want me to go…" I murmur… *oh no… I don't want to leave.*

“Of course not. I like having you here.” He frowns as he says this and then glances at his watch. “It’s late.” And he turns to look at me. “You’re biting your lip…” His voice is husky and he’s eyeing me speculatively.

“Sorry…”

“Don’t apologize… it’s just that I want to bite it too… hard.”

I gasp… how can he say things like that to me and not expect me to be affected.

“Come…” he murmurs.”

“What?”

“We’re going to rectify the situation right now.”

“What do you mean? What situation?”

“Your situation. Bella, I’m going to make love to you, now.”

“Oh…” The floor has fallen away... *I’m a situation*… I’m holding my breath.

“That’s if you want too… I mean I don’t want to be push my luck.”

“I thought you didn’t make love… I thought you fucked hard…” I swallow, my mouth suddenly dry.

He gives me a wicked grin, the effects of which travel all the way… down… *there*... “I can make an exception, or maybe combine the two, we’ll see. I really want to make love to you… please come to bed with me. I want our arrangement to work… but you really need to have some idea what you’re letting yourself in for. We can start your training tonight – with the basics. This doesn’t mean I've come over all hearts and flowers, it’s a means to an end… but one that I want and hopefully you do too.” His green gaze is intense.

I flush… oh my… wishes come true… “But I haven’t done all the things you require from your list of rules.” My voice is all breathy… hesitant.

“Forget about the rules. Forget about all that stuff for tonight. I want you. I’ve wanted you since you fell into my office… and I know you want me… you wouldn’t be sitting here calmly discussing punishment and hard limits if you didn’t. I can be gentle… and I will… please Bella… spend the night with me.”

He holds his hand out to me, his green eyes are bright, excited… and I put my hand in his. He pulls me up and into his arms so I can feel the length of his body against mine, this swift

action taking me completely by surprise. He runs his fingers round the nape of my neck and close to my scalp and he winds my ponytail around his wrist and gently pulls so I'm forced to look up at him.

He gazes down at me…

"You are one brave young woman," he whispers. "I am in awe of you…"

His words are like some kind of incendiary device… my blood flames… he leans down and kisses me gently on my lips and he sucks at my lower lip.

"I want to bite this lip," he murmurs against my mouth and very gently he tugs at it with his teeth … I moan… and he smiles.

"Please Bella… let me make love to you."

"Yes," I whisper… because that's why I'm here.

His smile is triumphant as he releases me and takes my hand.

His bedroom is vast, and looks out on a lit up, high-rise Seattle. The furnishings are simple. Pale blue, walls, bedding… the enormous bed is ultra-modern. Made of rough, grey wood, like driftwood… four posts, but no canopy. On the wall above it, a stunning painting of the sea. I am quaking like a leaf… this is it… finally… after all this time, I'm going to do it... with Edward Cullen. My breath is very shallow… and I can't take my eyes off him. He takes his watch off and places it on top of a chest of drawers that matches the bed. He turns and gazes at me, his expression soft. He's wearing his white linen shirt and jeans. He is heart-stoppingly beautiful… his bronze hair a mess, his shirt hanging out… his green eyes bold and dazzling… oh my. He steps out of his converse shoes and reaches up and takes his socks off individually. Edward Cullen's feet… wow… what is it about naked feet…?

"Do you want the blinds drawn?" he asks.

"I don't mind." I whisper. "I thought you didn't let anyone sleep in your bed."

"Who says we're going to sleep?" he murmurs softly.

"Oh…" *Holy Crow*...

He strolls slowly towards me. Confident, sexy, eyes blazing… my heart begins to pound. My blood's pumping around my body… ooh… desire pools in my belly. He's beside me staring down at me. *He's so freaking hot.*

“Let’s get this jacket off shall we…?” he says softly and he reaches for my shoulders and gently pushes my jacket off. He places it on a nearby chair.

“Do you have any idea how much I want you Bella Swan?” he whispers.

My breath hitches. I cannot take my eyes off his face. He reaches up and gently runs his fingers down my cheek to my chin.

“Do you have any idea what I’m going to do to you?” he adds softly, caressing my chin. The muscles inside the deepest darkest part of me clench in the most delicious fashion. I want to close my eyes… the pain is so sweet and sharp but I’m hypnotized by his green eyes, staring lustily down at me. He leans down and kisses me. His lips demanding, firm, slow… molding mine. He starts unbuttoning my blue blouse and slowly he peels it off me. He stands back and stares down at me. I’m in the pale blue lacy perfect-fit bra… thank heavens…

“Oh Bella…” he breathes. “You have the most beautiful skin… pale and flawless. I want to kiss every single inch of it.”

I flush… oh my… why did he say he couldn’t make love…? I will do anything he wants.

He reaches up and finds my hair tie, pulls it free, and gasps as my hair cascades down around my shoulders.

“Hmm… I really like brunettes…” he murmurs, and both of his hands are in my hair, grasping each side of my head, and he pulls me to him, and kisses me deeply, his tongue pressing at my lips. I moan and my tongue tentatively meets his. He puts his arms around me and pulls me against his body squeezing me tightly. One hand remains in my hair and the other travels down my spine to my waist and then down to my behind. His hand flexes over my behind and gently squeezes. He grasps me tightly and pulls me against his hips… I can feel his erection, which he pushes into me… oh…

I moan into his mouth… I can hardly contain these riotous feelings or is it hormones rampaging through my body. I want him so badly. I’m gripping his upper arms, feeling his biceps, he’s strong… muscular. Tentatively I move my hands up to his face and into his hair. Oh my… it’s so soft, unruly… I pull gently and he groans. He eases me towards the bed until I feel it behind my knees. I think he’s going to push me down on to it… but he doesn’t. Suddenly he releases me and drops to his knees. He grabs my hips with both his hands and runs his tongue around my navel… and then gently nips his way to my hipbone and then across my belly to my other hipbone.

“Ah…” I groan… seeing him on his knees in front of me and feeling his mouth on me...

My hands stay in his hair pulling gently… as I try to calm my breathing… it's so loud. Ooh... He looks up at me through his impossibly long lashes, his eyes a scorching dark jade. His hands reach up and undo the button on my jeans and he leisurely pulls down the zipper. Without taking his eyes off mine he slides my jeans down… very slowly, his hands, from the cheeks of my behind, gliding down… down my thighs. I cannot look away… He stops and licks his lips… never breaking eye contact… and he leans forward, his nose running up the apex between my thighs. I feel him… *there*...

"You smell so good…" he murmurs and closes his eyes, a look of pure pleasure on his face and I practically convulse. He pushes me gently so I fall on to the bed.

Still kneeling he grasps my foot and undoes my converse… he pulls off my shoe and sock. I raise myself up on my elbows to see what he's doing. I'm panting… wanting. He lifts my foot by the heel and runs his thumb nail up my instep… it's almost painful but I feel the movement echoed in my groin… I gasp. Not taking his eyes off mine again he runs his tongue along my instep and then his teeth… shit…. I groan… how can I feel this… *there*... I fall back on to the bed moaning. I hear his soft chuckle.

"Oh Bella… what I could do to you…" he whispers.

He removes my other shoe and sock and then stands and pulls my jeans off… I'm lying on his bed dressed only in my bra and panties and he's staring down at me…

"You are very beautiful, Isabella Swan. I can't wait to be inside you."

Holy Shit… his words… he's so seductive. I can barely breathe.

"Show me how you pleasure yourself."

What…? I frown.

"Don't be coy Bella… show me," he whispers.

I shake my head at him… "I don't know what you mean…" My voice is hoarse… I hardly recognize it, laced with desire.

"How do you make yourself come…? I want to see."

I shake my head… "I don't." I can barely speak.

He raises his eyebrows slightly, non-plused for a moment, and his eyes darken and he shakes his head in what I think is disbelief.

"Oh… well… we'll have to see what we can do about that." His voice is soft, challenging, a delicious sensual threat.

He undoes the button on his jeans and slowly pulls his jeans down, his eyes on mine the whole time. He leans down over me and grasping each of my ankles quickly jerks my legs apart and crawls on to the bed between my legs. He hovers over me. I am squirming with need.

"Keep still," he murmurs and he leans down and kisses the inside of my thigh, trailing kisses up, over the thin lacy material of my panties… kissing me… oh… I can't keep still… "We're going to have to work on keeping you still baby…" He trails kisses up my belly, his tongue dips into my navel… and still he's heading north… kissing me across my torso… my skin in burning… I'm flushed, too hot, too cold and I'm clawing at the duvet beneath me. He lays down beside me, and his hand trails up from my hip, to my waist and up to my breast. He looks down at me, his expression unreadable. He gently cups my breast.

"You fit my hand perfectly Isabella…" he murmurs and he dips his index finger into the cup of my bra and pulls it down freeing my breast, the under wire and the fabric of the cup forcing it upwards. His finger moves to my other breast and he repeats the process. My breasts swell and my nipples harden under his steady gaze… I am trussed-up by my own bra.

"Very nice…" he whispers appreciatively and my nipples harden even more. He blows very gently on one as his hand moves to my other breast and his thumb slowly rolls the end of my nipple, elongating it. I groan… I feel this right the way to my groin. I am so wet... *oh please*… I beg in my mind… and my fingers clasp the duvet tighter. His lips close around my other nipple and he tugs, I practically convulse.

"Let's see if we can make you come like this…" he whispers. And his slow, sensual assault continues. My nipples bearing the brunt of his deft fingers and lips, connected to every single nerve ending in my body, so that my whole body sings with the sweet agony. He just doesn't stop...

"Oh…please..." I beg and I pull my head back, my mouth open as I groan, my legs stiffening… holy shit what's happening to me?

"Let go… baby," he murmurs and his teeth close round my nipple and his thumb and finger pull hard and I fall apart in his hands, my body convulsing and shattering into a thousand pieces and then he's kissing me, deeply his tongue in my mouth and my cries are into his mouth.

That was extraordinary... oh my... now that's what all the fuss is about.

He gazes down at me… a satisfied smile on his face whilst I'm sure there's nothing but gratitude and awe on mine.

"You are so responsive," he breathes. "You're going to have to learn to control this… and it's going to be so much fun teaching you how…" he kisses me again. My breathing is still ragged as I come down from my orgasm. His hand moves down my waist to my hips and then cups me, intimately.... *Jeez.* His finger slips through the fine lace and slowly circles around me… *there*...

Briefly he closes his eyes… and his breathing hitches.

"You're so deliciously wet. God I want you."

He thrusts his finger inside me and I cry out, and he does it again, and again. He palms my clitoris and I cry out once more. He pushes inside me harder, and harder still and I groan. Suddenly he sits up and he pulls my panties off and throws them on the floor and pulls off his boxers, his erection springing fee… oh my… He reaches over to his bedside table and grabs a foil packet and he moves between my legs, spreading them further apart. He kneels up in front of me and pulls a condom on to his considerable length… wow… will it…? how…?

"Don't worry," he breathes… his eyes on mine, "You expand too."

He leans down, his hands on either side of my head, so he's hovering over me, staring down into my eyes, his jaw clenched, eyes burning.

"You really want to do this?" he asks softly.

"Please…" I beg.

"Pull your knees up," he orders softly and I'm quick to obey. "I'm going to fuck you now… Miss Swan," he murmurs as he positions the head of his cock at the entrance of my sex. "Hard," he whispers and he slams into me.

"Aargh!" I cry as I feel a weird pinching sensation deep inside me as he rips through my virginity and he stills, gazing down at me… his eyes bright with ecstatic triumph. His mouth is open slightly as his breathing is harsh.

"Oh…" he groans. "You're so tight… You okay?"

I nod, my eyes wide and my hands on his forearms. I feel so full… He eases back with exquisite slowness.

And he closes his eyes and groans… and thrusts into me again. I cry out a second time but this time he doesn't stop. He moves onto his elbows so I can feel his weight on me, holding me down. He pounds on… oh my… mercilessly, a relentless rhythm and I pick it up, meeting his thrusts… He grasps my head between his hands and he kisses me hard, his teeth pulling at my lower lip again. He shifts slightly and I can feel something building deep inside me, like before… I start to stiffen, he thrusts on and on… my body quivers, bows, I can feel a sheen of sweat gathering over my body… oh my… I didn't know if would feel like this… didn't know if could feel as good as this.... my thoughts are scattering... there's only sensation... oh please… I stiffen…

"Come for me, Bella," he whispers breathlessly and I unravel at his words, exploding around him, as I reach my climax and splinter into a million pieces underneath him. And as he comes he calls out my name, thrusting hard and stilling as he empties himself into me.

Chapter 16

I am still panting, trying to slow my breathing, my thumping heart and thoughts are in riotous disarray. *Wow… that was astounding.* I open my eyes and he has his forehead pressed against mine, his eyes closed. His breathing is ragged. His eyes flicker open and gaze down at me, his eyes dark but soft. He's still inside me. He leans down and gently presses a kiss against my forehead, and then slowly, he pulls out of me.

"Ooh." I wince at the unfamiliarity.

"Did I hurt you?" Edward asks quietly as he lies down beside me, propped on one elbow. He tucks a stray strand of my hair behind my ear.

And I have to grin… "*You* are asking me… if you hurt me!"

"The irony is not lost on me." He smiles sardonically. "Seriously, are you okay?" His eyes are intense, probing, demanding. I stretch out beside him. I feel loose-limbed and my bones are like jelly, and relaxed… deeply relaxed. I grin at him. I can't stop grinning. Now I know what all the fuss is about. Two orgasms, coming apart at the seams, like the spin cycle on a washer dryer. Wow. I had no idea what my body was capable of. Could be wound so tightly and released so violently, so gratifyingly. The pleasure was indescribable.

"You're biting your lip and you haven't answered me." He's frowning at me. I grin up at him impishly. He looks glorious, tousled hair, burning narrowed, green eyes, serious, dark expression.

"I'd like to do that again," I whisper.

And for a moment I think I see a fleeting look of relief on his face before the shutters come down and he gazes at me through hooded eyes.

"Would you now, Miss Swan?" he murmurs dryly. He leans down and kisses me very gently at the corner of my mouth. "Demanding little thing, aren't you. Turn on your front."

I blink at him momentarily and I turn over. He unhooks my bra and runs his hand down my back to my behind.

"You really have the most beautiful skin," he murmurs. He shifts so that one of his legs pushes between mine and he's half lying across my back.

I can feel the buttons of his shirt pressing in to me as he gathers my hair off my face, pulls it to one side and kisses my bare shoulder.

“Why are you wearing your shirt?”

He stills and pauses for a moment. After a beat, I feel him shuffle off his shirt and he lies back down on me and I can feel skin against skin. *Hmmm*, it feels heavenly. He has a light dusting of hair across his chest which tickles at my back.

“So you want me to fuck you again?” he whispers in my ear and begins to trail feather light kisses around my ear and down my neck. His hand moves down skimming my waist, over my hip and down my thigh to the back of my knee. He pushes my knee up higher and my breath hitches. *Oh my, what’s he doing now?* He moves so he’s between my legs, pressed against my back and his hand travels up my thigh to my behind and he starts caressing my cheek, slowly and then moving down, to between my legs.

“I’m going to take you from behind, Isabella,” he murmurs and with his other hand he grasps my hair at the nape in a fist and pulls gently, holding me in place. I cannot move my head. I am pinioned beneath him, helpless.

“You are mine,” he whispers. "Don't forget it." His voice is intoxicating. His words heady, seductive. I can feel his growing erection against my thigh. *Oh my.*

His long fingers reach around to gently massage my clitoris, circling slowly. I can feel his breath against my face as he slowly nips me along my jaw.

“You smell divine,” he nuzzles behind my ear. His hand rubbing against me, around and around. Oh my. Reflexivel,y my hips start to circle, mirroring his hand, as excruciating pleasure spikes through my blood like adrenaline.

“Keep still,” he orders softly and very slowly, he inserts his thumb inside me, rotating it around and around, stroking the front wall of my vagina. The effect is mind-blowing. All my energy is concentrating on this one small space inside my body. I moan.

“You like this?” he asks softly, his teeth grazing my outer ear and he starts to flex his thumb slowly, in, out, in, out. *Oh my*… His fingers still circling. I close my eyes, trying to keep my breathing under control, trying to absorb the disordered, chaotic sensations that his fingers are unleashing on me, fire coursing through my body. I moan again. “You’re so wet, so quickly. So responsive. Oh, Isabella, I like that. I like that a lot,” he whispers. I want to stiffen my legs, but I can’t move. He’s pinning me down, keeping up a constant, slow, tortuous rhythm. It’s absolutely exquisite. I moan again and he moves suddenly.

“Open your mouth,” he commands and thrusts his thumb in my mouth. My eyes fly open, blinking wildly.

“See how you taste,” he breathes against my ear. “Suck me, baby, hard.”

His thumb presses on my tongue and my mouth closes around him, sucking wildly, and I can taste the saltiness on his thumb. It is beyond erotic.

"I want to fuck your mouth Isabella, and I will soon," his voice is hoarse, raw, his breathing more disjointed. *Fuck my mouth!*

I moan and I bite down on him. He gasps and he pulls my hair tighter, painfully, so I release him.

"Naughty, sweet girl," he whispers and he reaches over to the bedside table for a foil packet. "Stay still, don't move," he orders as he let's go of my hair and I can hear the rip of the foil. I am breathing hard, my blood singing in my veins. The anticipation is exhilarating. I feel his weight on me against my back and he grabs my hair as before, holding my head immobile. I cannot move. I'm enticingly ensnared by him. He positions his erection at my entrance.

"We're going to take it really slow this time, Isabella." And very slowly he eases into me, to the hilt. Stretching, filling, relentless. I groan loudly. It feels deeper this time. Delectable. I groan again, and he deliberately circles his hips and pulls back, pauses a beat, and then eases his way back in. He repeats this motion again and again. It's driving me insane, the feeling of fullness overwhelming. "You feel so good," he groans and I can feel my insides start to quiver. He pulls back and waits.

"Oh no, baby… Not yet." he murmurs, and as the quivering ceases, he starts the whole delicious process again.

"Oh please," I beg. I'm not sure I can take much more. My body is wound so tight, craving release.

"I want you sore, baby," he murmurs and he continues his sweet leisurely torment, backwards, forward. "Every time you move tomorrow, I want you to be reminded that I've been here. Only me. You are mine."

I groan.

"Please, Edward," I whisper.

"What do you want, Isabella? Tell me."

I groan again. He pulls out and moves slowly back into me, circling his hips once more.

"Tell me," he murmurs.

"You. Please."

He increases the rhythm infinitesimally, and his breathing becomes more erratic. I can feel my insides quickening and Edward picks up the rhythm.

nation: none; mso-layout-grid-align: none; text-autospace: none;">“You.”

“Are.”

“So.”

“Sweet.”

He murmurs between each thrust.

“I.”

“Want.”

“You”

“So.”

“Much.”

I moan.

“You.”

“Are.”

“Mine. Come for me baby.”

He growls.

His words are my undoing, tipping me over the precipice. My body convulses around him and I come, loudly, calling out a garbled version of his name into the mattress. Edward follows, two sharp thrusts, he freezes, pouring himself into me as he finds his release. He collapses on top of me, his face in my hair.

“Fuck… Bella,” he breathes.

He pulls out of me immediately and rolls onto his side of the bed. I pull my knees up to my chest, utterly spent, and immediately drift off or pass out into an exhausted sleep.

When I wake, it's still dark. I have no idea how long I've slept. I stretch out beneath the covers and I feel sore, deliciously sore. Hmmm. Edward has gone. He's not beside me. I sit up, staring out at the cityscape in front of me. There are fewer lights on amongst the skyscrapers and there's a whisper of dawn in the east. I hear the music. The lilting notes of the piano. A sad, sweet lament, Bach I think, but I'm not sure. I wrap the duvet around me and quietly pad down the corridor towards the big room. Edward is at the piano, completely lost in the music he's playing. His expression sad and wanting, like the music. His playing is simply stunning. I lean against the wall at the entrance and listen, enraptured. He's such an accomplished musician. He sits naked, his body bathed in the warm light cast by a solitary free-standing lamp beside the piano. With the rest of the large room in darkness, it's like he's in his own isolating little pool of light, untouchable, in a bubble. I walk as quietly as I can toward him, enticed by the sublime, melancholy music. I watch his long, skilled fingers as they find and gently press the keys, thinking how those same fingers have expertly handled and caressed my body. I flush, gasp at the memory, and press my thighs together.

He glances up at me, his unfathomable green eyes bright, his expression unreadable.

"Sorry," I whisper. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

He frowns at me.

"Surely, I should be saying that to you," he murmurs softly. He finishes playing and puts his hands on his legs. I notice now that he's wearing PJ pants. He runs his fingers through his hair and he stands. His pants hang from his hips, in that… way… oh my. My mouth goes dry as he casually strolls around the piano to me. He has broad shoulders, narrow hips, and I can see his abdominal muscles ripple as he walks. Wow.

"You should be in bed," he admonishes me.

"That was a beautiful piece. Bach?"

"Transcription by Bach, but it's originally an oboe concerto by Alessandro Marcello."

"Well it was … exquisite. But very sad, such a melancholy melody."

His lips quirk up at me. "Bed," he orders. "You'll be exhausted in the morning."

"I woke and you weren't there."

"I find it difficult to sleep, and I'm not used to sleeping with anyone," he murmurs. I can't fathom his mood. He seems a little despondent, but it's difficult to tell in the darkness. Perhaps it was the tone of the piece he was playing. He puts his arm around me and gently walks me back to the bedroom.

“How long have you been playing? You’re very good.”

“Since I was six.”

“Oh.”

Edward as a six-year-old boy. I have an image of a beautiful, copper-haired little boy with green eyes and my heart melts. A copper-haired kid who likes impossibly sad music.

“How are you feeling?” he asks gently when we are back in the room.

He switches on a sidelight.

“I’m good.”

We both glance down at the bed at the same time, and realize there’s blood on the sheets. Evidence of my lost virginity. I flush, embarrassed, pulling the duvet tighter around me.

“Well, that’s going to give Mrs. Cope something to think about,” Edward mutters as he stands in front of me. He puts his hand under my chin and tips my head back, staring down at me. His eyes are intense as he examines my face closely. I realize that I’ve not seen his naked chest, with a smattering of dark hair, before. Instinctively, I tentatively reach out to gently touch the hair on his chest, to see how it feels under my fingertips. He steps back away from me before I reach him.

“Get into bed. I’ll come and lie down with you,” he murmurs.

I drop my hand and frown. I don’t think I’ve ever touched his torso. He opens a chest of drawers, pulls out a t-shirt and quickly puts it on.

“Bed,” he orders again. I climb back onto the bed, trying not to think about the blood. He clambers in beside me and pulls me into his embrace, wrapping his arms around me so that I’m facing away from him. He kisses my hair gently and I can feel him inhale deeply.

“Sleep, sweet Isabella,” he murmurs. I close my eyes, but I can’t help feel a residual melancholy either from the music or his demeanor. Edward Cullen has a sad side. *Hmmm.*

Chapter 17

Light fills the room coaxing me from a deep sleep to wakefulness. I stretch out and open my eyes. It's a beautiful May morning. Seattle at my feet…. wow… what a view. Beside me Edward Cullen is still fast asleep… wow… what a view. I'm surprised he's still asleep. He's facing me and I have an unprecedented opportunity to study him. His lovely face looks younger relaxed in sleep. His sculptured, pouty lips are parted slightly and his shiny, clean hair is a glorious mess… how could anyone look this good and still be legal…? And then I think of his room upstairs… perhaps he's not legal. I shake my head, so much to think about. It's tempting to reach out and touch him… but like a small child, he's so lovely when he's asleep… I don't have to worry about what I'm saying, what he's saying… what plans he has… especially his plans for me.

I could gaze at him all day… but I have needs – bathroom needs. Slipping out of bed, I find his white shirt on the floor and shrug it on. I walk through a door thinking that it might be the bathroom but I'm in a vast walk-in closet, as big as my bedroom. Lines and lines of expensive suits, shirts, shoes, ties… How can anyone need this many clothes? I tut with disapproval. Actually, Rose's wardrobe probably rivals this… Rose, *oh no*… I haven't thought about her all evening. I wonder briefly how she's getting on with Emmett… I belatedly remember that I was supposed to text her when I arrived. Holy Crap… I'm going to be in trouble.

I turn and head back to the bedroom. Edward is still asleep. I try the other door and it's the ensuite, again bigger than my bedroom… why does one man need so much space? Two sinks, I notice with irony. Well given he doesn't sleep with anyone… one of them can't have been used…

I stare at myself in the gigantic mirror above the sinks. Do I look different? I feel different. I feel a little sore, if I'm honest, and my muscles… it's like I've never done any exercise in my life. *You don't do any exercise in your life*… my subconscious has woken. She's staring at me with pursed lips, tapping her foot. So you've just slept with him… given away your virginity, a man who doesn't love you, in fact he has a very odd ideas about you… wants to make you some sort of kinky sex slave… ARE YOU MAD? She's shouting at me. I wince as I look in the mirror. I am going to have to think about all this. Honestly, fancy falling for a man who's beyond beautiful, richer than Croesus and has a red room of pain waiting for me… It's definitely the last bit that I have a question mark over. I shudder. My hair is its usual wayward self… *hmmm,* just-fucked hair… it doesn't suit me. I try and bring order to the chaos with my fingers but fail miserably and give up – maybe I'll find hair ties in my bag.

I'm starving. I head back out to the bedroom. Sleeping beauty is … still sleeping, so I leave him and head for the kitchen.*Oh no… Rose*. I left my bag in Edward's study. I fetch it and reach for my cell phone. Three texts.

RU OK Bella

Where RU Bella

Damn it Bella

I call Rose… when she doesn't answer, leave her a groveling message to tell her I am alive and have not succumbed to Bluebeard… well not in the sense she would be worried about... *or perhaps I have*. Oh this is so confusing. I have to try and categorize and analyze my feelings for Edward Cullen. It's an impossible task… I shake my head in defeat. I need alone time... away from here to process all this.

I find two welcome hair ties at the same time in my bag and quickly tie my hair in pigtails… yes. The more girly I look perhaps the safer I'll be from Bluebeard. I take my ipod out of the bag and plug my headphones in… nothing like music to cook by. I slip it into the breast pocket of Edward's shirt… turn it up loud and start dancing.

Holy Crow I'm hungry.

I am daunted by his kitchen - it's so sleek and modern… and none of the cupboards have handles. It takes me a few seconds to deduce that I have to push the cupboard doors to open them. Perhaps I should cook Edward breakfast. He was eating omelet the other day at the Heathman. I check in the fridge…plenty of eggs. Actually I want pancakes and bacon. I set about making some batter, dancing my way round the kitchen.

Being busy is good. It allows a bit of time to think, but not too deeply. Music blaring in my ears also helps to stave off deep thought. I need time to think this all through. I came here to spend the night in Edward Cullen's bed, and managed it, even though he doesn't let anyone in his bed… I smile to myself… yep. Mission accomplished. Big time. I grin… big, big time, and I'm distracted by the memory of him… his words, his body, his lovemaking… wow… I close my eyes as my body hums at the recollection, and I feel the delicious contraction of muscles deep in my belly… oh my. My subconscious scowls at me… *fucking –not lovemaking* - she screams at me like a harpy. I ignore her, but deep down I know she has a point.

There is a state-of-the-art range cooker… I think I have the hang of it… I need somewhere to keep the pancakes warm, and I start on the bacon. Amy Studt is singing in my ear… *You got the wrong girl*… hmmm…. *I don't play your game*. This song used to mean so much to me… *I'm a misfit*… I am a misfit… I have never fitted in and now… well… I have an

indecent proposal to consider from King Misfit himself. Why is he this way? Nature or Nurture... It's so alien to anything I know.

I put the bacon rashers under the grill. Whilst the bacon is cooking I whisk some eggs. I turn to think about laying the table and Edward is sitting on one of the bar stools at the breakfast bar, leaning on it, his face supported by his steepled hands. He's still wearing the t-shirt he's slept in. Just-fucked hair, really, really suits him, as does his designer stubble. He has a look of bewildered amusement on his face. I freeze, flush… and then gather myself and pull the headphones out of my ears, my knees weak at the site of him.

"Good morning Miss Swan. You're very energetic this morning," he says dryly.

"I slept well." I stutter my explanation.

His lips quirk up, "I can't imagine why." He frowns, "So did I, after I came back to bed."

"Are you hungry?"

"Very," he says with an intense look in his eyes… and I'm not sure if he's referring to food.

"Pancakes, bacon and eggs?"

"Sounds great."

"I don't know where you keep your tablemats..." I shrug, trying desperately hard not to look flustered.

"I'll do that… you cook. Would you like me to put some music on… so you can continue your… err… dancing?"

I stare down at my fingers… knowing that I am turning puce.

"Please, don't stop on my account. It's very entertaining."

I purse my lips at him… entertaining eh? My subconscious has doubled over in laughter at me… I turn and continue to whisk the eggs… probably beating them a little harder than they need. In a moment he's beside me. He gently pulls my pigtail…

"I love these," he whispers. "They won't protect you…" *Hmmm Bluebeard…*

"How would you like your eggs?" I ask tartly.

He smiles.

"Thoroughly whisked and beaten," he smirks.

I turn back to the task in hand trying to hide my smile. He's hard to stay mad at. Especially when he's being so uncharacteristically playful. He opens a drawer and takes out two black slate tablemats for the breakfast bar. I pour the egg mix into a pan, pull out the bacon and turn it over and put it back under the grill.

When I turn back round there is orange juice on the table and he's making coffee.

"Would you like some tea?"

"Yes please. If you have some…"

I find a couple of plates and place them in the warming tray of the range. Edward reaches into a cupboard and pulls out some Twining's English Breakfast tea. I purse my lips.

"Bit of a foregone conclusion wasn't I?"

"Are you? I'm not sure we've concluded anything yet Miss Swan," he murmurs.

What does he mean by that? Our negotiations…? Our…err relationship… whatever that is? He's still so cryptic. I serve up the breakfast on to the heated plates and lay them on the tablemats. I hunt in refrigerator and find some maple syrup.

I glance up at Edward and he's waiting for me to sit down.

"Miss Swan." He motions to one of the bar stools.

"Mr Cullen." I nod in acknowledgement.

I climb up and wince slightly as I sit down.

"Just how sore are you?" he asks as he sits down. His green eyes dark.

I flush… *why does he ask such personal questions?*

"Well, to be truthful I have nothing to compare this to," I snap at him. "Did you wish to offer your commiserations?" I ask too sweetly.

I think he's trying to stifle a smile… but I can't be sure.

"No… I wondered if we should continue your basic training."

"Oh…" I stare at him dumbfounded… as I stop breathing and everything inside me clenches tight. *Ooh…. that's so nice.* I suppress my groan.

"Eat, Isabella."

My appetite has become uncertain again… more… more sex… *hmmm*…

"This is delicious, incidentally," he grins at me.

I try a forkful of omelet but can barely taste it. Basic training... *I want to fuck your mouth*… does that form part of basic training?

"Stop biting your lip. It's very distracting and I happen to know you're not wearing anything under my shirt… which makes it even more distracting," he growls.

I dunk my teabag in the small pot that Edward has provided.

My mind is in a whirl…"What sort of basic training did you have in mind?" I ask, my voice slightly too high betraying my wish to sound as natural, disinterested and calm as I can with my hormones wreaking havoc through my body.

"Well, as you're sore, I thought we could stick to oral skills."

I choke on my tea, and I stare at him… eyes wide, mouth open. He pats me gently on the back and passes me some orange juice. I cannot tell what he's thinking.

"That's if you want to stay…" he adds, softly.

I glance up at him as I try and recover my equilibrium… his expression is unreadable. It's so frustrating.

"I'd like to stay… for today. I have to work tomorrow."

"What time do you have to be at work tomorrow?"

"Nine."

"I'll get you to work for nine tomorrow."

I frown… *does he want me to stay another night?*

"I'll need to go home tonight – I need clean clothes."

"We can get you some here…"

I don't have spare cash to spend on clothes… His hand comes up and he grasps my chin, pulling at it slightly so my lip is released from the grip of my teeth. I'm not even aware I've been biting my lip.

"What is it?" he asks.

"I need to be home this evening."

His mouth is a hard line. "Okay… this evening," he acquiesces. "Now eat your breakfast."

My thoughts and my stomach are in turmoil… my appetite vanished. I stare at my half - eaten breakfast. I'm just not hungry.

"Eat Isabella. You didn't eat last night."

"I'm really not hungry," I whisper.

His eyes narrow at me. "I would really like you to finish your breakfast."

"What is it with you and food?" I blurt…

He knits his brow. "I told you I have issues with wasted food. Eat," he snaps.

His eyes are dark, pained… *Holy Crow. What is that all about?*

I pick up my fork and eat… slowly. Trying to chew. I must remember not to put so much on my plate if he's going to be all weird about food.

His expression softens as I carefully make my way through my breakfast. I note that he cleans his plate. He waits for me to finish and he clears my plate.

"You cooked, I'll clear."

"That's very democratic."

"Yes…" he frowns. "Not my usual style. After I've done this, we'll take a bath."

"Oh… okay." *Oh my… I'd much rather have a shower…*

My phone rings, interrupting my reverie.

It's Rose.

"Hi." I wander over to the glass doors of the balcony… away from him.

“Bella, why didn’t you text last night?” She sounds cross.

“I’m sorry, I was… overtaken by events.”

“You’re okay?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“Did you?” The expectation in her voice...

“Rose… I don’t want to talk over the phone…” Edward glances up at me.

“You did… I can tell.”

How can she tell…? She’s bluffing… and I can’t talk about this… I’ve signed a bloody agreement.

“Rose, please.”

“What was it like? Are you okay?”

“I’ve told you I’m okay.”

“Was he gentle?”

“Rose, please...!” I can’t hide my exasperation.

“Bella, don’t hold out on me, I’ve been waiting for this day for nearly four years.”

“I’ll see you this evening.” I hang up.

That is going to be one difficult square to circle… she’s so tenacious and she’s going to want to know, in detail… and I can’t tell her I’ve signed a… what was it called…? NDA… she’ll freak… and rightly so. I need a plan.

I head back to watch Mr Cullen move gracefully around his kitchen.

“The NDA, does it cover everything?” I ask tentatively.

“Why?” he turns and gazes at me whilst putting the Twinings away.

I flush. “Well I have a few questions… you know, about sex.” I stare down at my fingers. “And I’d like to ask Rose.”

"You can ask me."

"Edward… with all due respect…" My voice fades. *I can't ask you*… I'll get your biased, messed-up, kinky-as-hell, distorted world-view regarding sex… I want a healthy impartial opinion… "It's just about mechanics… I won't mention the red room of pain."

He raises his eyebrows at me. "Red room of pain? It's mostly about pleasure, Isabella. Believe me…" he says softly. "Besides," his tone is harsher, "your room-mate is making the beast with two backs with my brother. I really rather you didn't."

"Does your family know about your… err, predilection?"

"No. It's none of their business." He saunters slowly towards me until he's standing in front of me. "What do you want to know?" he asks softly and raising his hand runs his fingers gently down my cheek to my chin, tilting my head back so he can look directly into my eyes. I squirm inwardly… I cannot lie to this man.

"Nothing specific at the moment," I whisper.

"Well, we can start with… how was last night for you?" His eyes burn into me… filled with curiosity. *He's anxious to know. Wow*…

"Good," I murmur.

His lips lift slightly. "Me too," he murmurs. "I've never had vanilla sex before. There's a lot to be said for it. But then, maybe it's because it's with you…" He runs his thumb across my lower lip.

I gasp. *Vanilla sex?*

"Come, let's have a bath…" he leans down and kisses me gently, and my heart leaps and desire pools… way down low… way down *there*...

Chapter 18

The bath is a white stone, deep, egg-shaped affair, very designer. Edward leans over and fills the bath from the faucet on the tiled wall. He pours expensive looking bath oil in. It foams as the bath fills and smells of sweet, sultry Jasmine.*Hmmm*. He stands and gazes at me, his eyes dark, then peels his t-shirt off and casts it on the floor.

"Miss Swan." He holds his hand out to me. I am standing in the doorway, wide-eyed, wary. My arms wrapped around myself. I step forward. Admiring his physique… again. He is just yummy. My subconscious swoons, and passes out somewhere in the back of my head. I take his hand and he bids me to step into the bath… Whilst I am still wearing his shirt? I do as I'm told. I'll have to get used to it if I'm going to take him up on his outrageous offer… *if!* The water is enticingly hot.

"Turn around, face me," he orders, his voice soft.

I do as I'm bid. He's watching me intently.

"I know that lip is delicious, I can attest to that, but will you stop biting it?" he says through clenched teeth. "You chewing it… makes me want to fuck you, and you're sore, okay?"

I gasp, automatically unlocking my lip, shocked.

"Yeah," he challenges. "Got the picture." He glares at me.

I nod frantically. *I had no idea I could affect him so…*

"Good." He reaches forward, takes my ipod out of the breast pocket and puts it by the sink. "Water and ipods – not a clever combination," he mutters.

He reaches down, grasps the hem of my white shirt, lifts it above my head and discards it on the floor

He stands back to gaze at me. *I'm naked for heaven's sake.* I flush, and stare down at my hands, level with my the base of my belly, and I desperately wanting to disappear into the hot water and foam, but I know he won't want that.

"Hey."

I peek up at him and he has his head cocked to one side.

"Isabella, you are a very beautiful woman, the whole package. Don't hang your head like you're ashamed. You have nothing to be ashamed of and it's a real joy to stand here and gaze at you." He takes my chin in his hand and tilts my head up to reach his eyes. They are soft and warm, heated even. *Oh my.* He's so close, I could just reach up and touch him. "You can get in the water now." He halts my scattered thoughts and I scoot down into the warm, welcoming water. Ooh. It stings a bit, which takes me by surprise, but it smells heavenly too, and the pain soon ebbs. I lie back and briefly close my eyes, relaxing in the soothing warmth. When I open them he is gazing down at me.

"Why don't you join me?" I ask – bravely I think – my voice husky.

"I think I will. Move forward," he orders.

He strips out of his PJ pants and climbs in behind me. The water rises as he sits behind me and pulls me against his chest. He places his long legs over mine, his knees bent and his ankles level with mine and he pulls his feet apart, opening my legs. Oh my… I feel his nose in my hair and he inhales deeply.

"You smell so good, Isabella."

A tremor runs through my whole body. *I am naked, in a bath with Edward Cullen Esquire. He's naked*. If someone had told me I'd be doing this when I woke up in his hotel suite yesterday, I would not have believed them. Holy crap. Was that just yesterday?

He reaches for a bottle of body wash from the built-in shelf beside the bath and squirts some into his hand. He rubs his hands together, creating a soft foaming lather, and then closes his hands around my neck. He starts to rub the soap into my neck and shoulders, massaging firmly with his long, strong fingers. I groan. It feels so good, his hands on me.

"You like that?" I can hear the smile in his voice.

"Hmmm."

He moves down my arms and then under them, to my underarms, washing gently. I am so glad Rose insisted I shave. He moves across to my breasts. I take a sharp intake of breath as his hands encircle my breasts and start to knead them gently, taking no prisoners. My body bows instinctively pushing my breasts into his hands. My nipples are tender, very tender, no doubt from his less-than-delicate treatment of them last night. He doesn't linger long, my breathing has picked up, my heart racing, and his hands move down to my stomach and my belly. I can feel his growing erection against my behind. It's such a turn-on knowing that it's my body making him feel this way. *Ha, not your mind*, my subconscious sneers. I shake the unwelcome thought off.

He stops and reaches for a washcloth. As I pant against him, wanting – needing – my hands on his firm, muscular thighs – he squirts more soap on to the washcloth, leans down and washes between my legs. I hold my breath. His fingers skillfully stimulating me through the cloth, it's heavenly. My hips start moving at their own rhythm, pushing against his hand. As the sensations take over I tilt my head back, my eyes rolling to the back of my head, my mouth slack as I groan. I can feel the pressure building, slowly, inexorably, inside me. Oh my…

"Feel it, baby," Edward whispers in my ear and very gently grazes my earlobe with his teeth. "Feel it for me…" He has my legs, pinioned by his, to the side of the bath, holding me prisoner. Giving him easy access to this most private part of myself.

"Oh, please," I beg. I try to stiffen my legs as my body goes rigid. I am in a sexual thrall to this man. He doesn't let me move.

"I think you're clean enough now," he murmurs and stops.

What! No… no… no. My breathing is ragged. "Why are you stopping?" I can hardly get the words out.

"Because I have other plans for you, Isabella."

What? Oh my. But, I was… That's not fair.

"Turn around. I need washing, too," he murmurs.

I turn and he has his erection firmly in his grasp. My mouth drops open.

"I want you to become well acquainted, on first name terms if you will, with my favorite and most cherished part of my body. I'm very attached to this…"

It's so big and growing. Above the water line. I glance up at him and come face to face with his wicked grin. He's enjoying my astounded expression. I realise that I'm staring, eyes wide, and my mouth is open. I swallow. *That was inside me!* It doesn't seem possible. He wants me to touch him. *Hmmm*. Okay, bring it on. I smile at him and reach for the body wash, squirting some soap on to my hand. I do as he's done, lathering the soap in my hands until they are foamy. I do not take my eyes off his. My lips are parted to accommodate my breathing. Very deliberately, I gently bite my bottom lip and then run my tongue across it, tracing where my teeth have been. His eyes are dark jade, serious, and they widen slightly as my tongue skims my lower lip. I reach forward and place one of my hands around him, mirroring how he's holding himself. His eyes close briefly… Wow … feels much firmer than I expect. I squeeze and he places his hand over mine.

"Like this," he whispers and moves his hand up and down with a firm grip around my fingers, my fingers tight around him. He closes his eyes again and his breath hitches in his throat. When he opens them again, his gaze is scorching bright emerald.

"That's right, baby." He moves his hand away leaving me to continue alone. He closes his eyes as I move up and down his length. He flexes his hips slightly, into my hand, and reflexively I grasp him tighter. A low groan escapes from deep within his throat. *Fuck my mouth… Hmmm*. I remember him pushing his thumb in my mouth and asking me to suck… hard. His mouth drops open slightly as his breathing increases. I lean forward, whilst he has his eyes closed, and place my lips around him and tentatively suck, running my tongue over the tip.

"Whoa… Bella." His eyes fly open and I suck harder. "Jesus," he groans and he closes his eyes again. I start to move down, pushing him into my mouth. He groans again. Ha… My inner goddess is thrilled. I can do this. *I* can fuck *him* with my mouth. I twirl my tongue around the tip again and he flexes his hips, his eyes are open now, blistering with heat. His teeth are clenched as he flexes again and I push him deeper into my mouth, supporting myself on his thighs. I can feel his legs tense beneath my hands. He reaches up and grabs my pigtails and starts to really move.

"Oh, baby, that feels good," he murmurs.

I suck harder, flicking my tongue across the head of his cock, and wrapping my teeth behind my lips, I clamp my mouth around him. He breathes out. His breathing louder and he groans.

"Jesus… How far can you go?" he whispers.

Hmmm. I pull him deeper into my mouth so I can feel him at the back of my throat, and then to the front again. My tongue swirls around the end. He's my very own Edward Cullen flavor Popsicle, I suck harder and harder. Pushing him deeper and deeper, swirling my tongue around and around. *Hmmm,* I had no idea giving pleasure could be such a turn-on, watching him writhe carefully with carnal longing. My inner goddess is doing the merengue with some salsa moves.

"Isabella, I'm going to come in your mouth," his breathy tone is warning. "If you don't want me to… stop now." He flexes his hips again. His eyes are wide, wary, filled with salacious need – need for me, for my mouth. Oh my.

Holy crap, his hands are really gripping my hair. I can do this. I push even harder and in a moment of extraordinary confidence I bare my teeth. It tips him over the edge, he cries out and stills and I can feel warm, salty, liquid oozing down my throat. I swallow quickly. Ugh… I'm not sure about this, but one look at him, and he's come apart in the bath.

Because of me… And I don't care. I sit back and watch him, a triumphant smile tugging at my the corners of my lips. Well, I don't want to gloat.

His breathing is ragged. He opens his eyes and he glares at me.

"Don't you have a gag reflex?" he asks, astonished. "Christ, Bella. That was… Good, really good, unexpected though." He frowns. "You know, you never cease to amaze me."

I smile and consciously bite my lip. He eyes me speculatively.

"Have you done that before?"

"No." And I can't help the small tinge of pride in my denial.

"Good," he says complacently and I think... relieved. "Yet another first Miss Swan." He looks appraisingly at me. "Well, you get an A in oral skills. Come on, let's go to bed. I owe you an orgasm." And very quickly, he clambers out of the bath, giving me my first full glimpse of the Greek god, divinely formed, that is Edward Cullen. Oh my. My inner goddess has stopped dancing and is staring too, mouth open, drooling slightly. His erection is tamed, but still... substantial. Wow. He wraps a small towel around his waist, covering the essentials and holds out a larger fluffy white towel for me. I climb out of the bath, taking his proffered hand. He wraps me in the towel and he pulls me into his arms and kisses me hard, pushing his tongue into my mouth. I long to reach round and embrace him, touch him, but he has my arms trapped in the towel. But I'm soon lost in his kiss. He cradles my head, his tongue exploring my mouth, and I get a sense he's expressing his gratitude. Maybe, for a my first blowjob? W*hat's that about?*

He pulls away, his hands on either side of my face, staring intently into my eyes. He looks… lost.

"Say yes," he whispers fervently.

I frown, not understanding. "To what?"

"Yes to our arrangement, to being mine. Please, Bella," he whispers, emphasizing the last word and my name, pleading. He kisses me again, sweetly, passionately, before he stands back and stares at me, blinking slightly. He takes my hand and leads me back to his bedroom, leaving me reeling, so I follow him meekly. Stunned. *He really wants this…*

Chapter 19

In his bedroom, he stares down at me as we stand by his bed.

"Trust me?" he asks suddenly, softly.

I nod, wide-eyed, with the sudden realization that I do. I trust him. *What's he going to do to me now?* I feel an electric thrill hum through me.

"Good girl," he breathes, his thumb brushing my bottom lip.

He steps away, into his closet, and comes back with a grey silk tie.

"Bring your hands together, in front of you," he orders quietly as he peels the towel off me and throws it on the floor. I do as he asks and very gently, he binds my wrists together with his tie, knotting it firmly. His eyes are bright with wild excitement. He pulls at the binding… it's secure. *Some boy scout he must have been to learn these knots*. Oh my. What now? My pulse has gone through the roof. My heart is beating a frantic tattoo. He runs his fingers down my pigtails.

"You look so young with these," he murmurs and moves forward. Instinctively, I move back until I feel the bed against the back of my knees. He drops his towel, but I can't take my eyes off his face. His expression is ardent, full of desire.

"Oh Isabella, what shall I do to you?" he whispers and he lowers me on to the bed, lying beside me and he raises my hands above my head.

"Keep your hands up here. Don't move them, understand?" His eyes burn into mine and I'm breathless from their intensity. This is not a man I want to cross… ever.

"Answer me," he demands softly.

"I won't move my hands," I breathe back at him.

"Good girl." Very deliberately, he licks his lips slowly. I'm hypnotized by his tongue. He's staring into my eyes, watching me, appraising. Oh my. He leans down and plants a chaste, swift kiss on my lips.

"I'm going to kiss you all over, Miss Swan," he says softly and he cups my chin, pushing it up giving him access to my throat. He runs his lips down my throat, kissing, sucking, nipping me on the way down to the small dip at the base of my neck. My body leaps to

attention everywhere. My recent bath experience has made my skin hyper-sensitive. My heated blood pools low in my belly, between my legs, right down *there.* I groan.

I want to touch him. I move my hands and rather awkwardly, given I'm restrained, feel his hair. He stops kissing me and glares up at me, shaking his head from side-to-side, tutting as he does. He reaches for my hands and places them above my head again.

"Don't move your hands… or we just have to start all over again." He scolds me mildly. Oh… He's such a tease.

"I want to touch you." My voice is all breathy, and out of control.

"I know," he murmurs purposefully. "Keep your hands above your head," he orders gently.

He cups my chin again and starts to kiss my throat as before. Oh, he's so frustrating. I feel his hands run down my body, over my breasts as he reaches the dip at the base of my neck. He runs the tip of his nose around it. He begins a very leisurely cruise with his mouth, heading south, down my body following his hands, to my breasts, each one, kissed, nipped, nipples gently sucked. Holy crap. My hips start swaying and moving of their own accord, grinding to the rhythm of his mouth on me, and I'm desperately trying to remember to keep my hands above my head. He reaches my navel and dips his tongue inside, then gently grazes my belly with his teeth. My body bows off the bed.

"Hmmm… You are so sweet, Miss Swan."

He runs his nose along the line between my belly and my pubic hair, biting me gently, teasing me with his tongue. He sits suddenly and kneels at my feet grasping both my ankles and spreading my legs wide.

Holy fuck. He picks up my left foot and bends my knee, bringing my foot up to his mouth. Watching and assessing my every reaction, he gently kisses each of my toes and then bites each one of them softly on the pads. Oh my… When he reaches my little toe, he bites harder and I convulse, whimpering. He glides his tongue up my instep, and I can no longer watch him. It's too erotic. I think I'm going to combust. I squeeze my eyes shut and try to absorb and manage all the sensations he's creating. He kisses my ankle and trails kisses up my calf, to my knee, stopping just above. He then starts on my right foot, repeating the whole, seductive, mind-blowing process.

"Oh, please," I moan as he bites my little toe.

"All good things, Miss Swan," he breathes.

This time he doesn't stop at my knee. He continues up the inside of my thigh, pushing my thighs apart as he does, and I know what he's going to do. Part of me wants to push him off, mortified, embarrassed. He's going to kiss me *there*, I know it, and part of me is

glorying in the anticipation. He turns to my other knee and kisses his way up my thigh, kissing, licking, sucking and then he's between my legs. Running his nose up and down my sex, very softly, very gently. I writhe. Oh my…

He stops, waiting for me to calm. I do and I raise my head to gaze at him, my mouth open as my pounding heart struggles to come out.

"Do you know how intoxicating you smell, Miss Swan?" he murmurs, and keeping his eyes on mine, he pushes his nose into my pubic hair and inhales. I think I flush scarlet, everywhere, feeling faint.

He blows gently up the length of my sex. *Oh fuck.*

"I like this." He gently tugs at my pubic hair. "Perhaps we'll keep this."

"Oh… please," I beg.

"Hmmm… I like it when you beg me, Isabella."

I groan.

"Tit for tat is not my usual style, Miss Swan," he whispers as he gently blows up and down on me. "But you've pleased me today, Isabella, and you should be rewarded." I can hear the wicked grin in his voice and while my body is singing from his words his tongue starts to slowly circle my clitoris.

"Aargh!" I moan as my body bows and convulses at the touch of his tongue.

He keeps up the torture, around and around, and I'm losing all sense of self, every atom of my being concentrating hard on that small, potent powerhouse at the apex of my thighs. My legs go rigid, and he slips his finger inside me, and I hear his growling groan.

"Oh, baby. I love that you're so wet for me."

He moves his finger in a wide circle, stretching me, pulling at me, his tongue mirroring his actions, around and around. I groan. It is too much. My body begs for relief and I can no longer deny it. I let go, losing all cogent thought as my orgasm seizes me, wringing my insides, again and again. *Holy fuck.* I cry out and the world dips and disappears from view as the force of my climax renders everything null and void.

I am panting, and vaguely I hear the rip of foil and then he's in me. Fast, hard and large, thrusting into me, over and over, implacable, pushing me over the edge again. I whimper.

"Come for me, baby," his voice is harsh, hard, raw at my ear, and I explode around him as he pounds rapidly into me. "Thank fuck," he whispers and he thrusts hard twice more and groans as he reaches his climax, pressing himself into me, and then he stills, his body rigid. Collapsing on top of me, I feel his full weight, forcing me into the mattress. I pull my tied hands over his neck and hold him the best I can. I know in that moment that I would do anything for this man. I am in his sexual thrall. The wonder that he's introduced me to - it's beyond anything I could have imagined, and he wants to take it further. So much further, to a place I can't, in my innocence, even imagine. *Oh. What to do?*

He leans up and stares down at me.

"See how good we are together," he murmurs. "If you give yourself to me, it will be so much better. Trust me, Isabella. I can take you places you don't even know exist." His thoughts echo mine. He strokes his nose against mine. I am still reeling from the most extraordinary physical reaction I've ever experienced. I gaze up at him blankly.

And suddenly, we both become aware of voices in the hall outside his bedroom door. It takes a moment to process what I can hear.

"But if he's still in bed then he must be ill. He's never in bed at this time. Edward never sleeps in."

"Mrs. Cullen, please…"

"*Taylor. You cannot keep me from my son."*

"*Mrs. Cullen, he's not alone."*

"*What do you mean he's not alone?"*

"He has someone with him."

" *Oh…*" Even I can hear the disbelief in her voice.

Edward blinks rapidly, staring down at me.

"Shit. It's my mother." Edward is wide-eyed with humored horror.

He pulls out of me suddenly, ooh, sticky, and sitting on the bed, throws the used condom in a wastebasket.

"Come on, we need to get dressed – that's if you want to meet my mother."

He grins at me, then leaps up and pulls on his jeans, no underwear!

I struggle to sit up. I'm still tethered.

"Edward, I can't move."

His grin widens and leaning down, he undoes the tie. I notice that it has three silver stripes at the end. He gazes at me. He looks amused, his eyes dancing with mirth.

He kisses my forehead quickly and beams at me.

"Another first," he acknowledges, but I have no idea what he's talking about.

"I have no clean clothes in here." I am filled with sudden panic, and considering what I've just experienced, I'm finding the panic overwhelming. His mother! *Holy crap*. I have no clean clothes and she's practically walked in on us in flagrante delicto.

"Perhaps I should stay here."

"Oh no you don't," Edward threatens. "You can wear something of mine."

He's pulled on a white t-shirt and he's running his hand through his just-fucked hair. In spite of my anxiety, I lose my train of thought. Will I ever get used to looking at this beautiful man? His beauty is derailing.

"Isabella, you could be wearing a sack and you'd look lovely. Please don't worry. I'd like you to meet my mother. Get dressed. I'll just go and calm her down." His mouth presses into a hard line. "I will expect you in that room in five minutes, otherwise I'll come and drag you out of here myself in whatever you're wearing. My t-shirts are in this drawer, my shirts are in the closet. Help yourself." He eyes me speculatively for a moment and then he leaves the room.

Holy shit. Edward's mother. This is so much more than I bargained for. Perhaps meeting her will help put a little part of the jigsaw in place. Might help me understand why Edward is the way he is. *Hmmm*. Suddenly, I want to meet her. I pull my blue blouse off the floor. It has survived the night well, hardly any creases. I find my blue bra under the bed and dress quickly. But if there's one thing I hate, it's not wearing clean panties. I rifle through Edward's chest of drawers and come across his boxers. I pull on a nice pair of tight Calvin Kleins in grey and pull on my jeans and converse. I dash into the bathroom and stare at my too-bright eyes, my flushed face – and my hair! Holy crap. Just-fucked pigtails do not suit me either. I hunt in the vanity unit for a brush and find a comb. It will have to do. A ponytail is the only answer. I despair at my clothes. Maybe I should take Edward up on his offer of clothes. My subconscious purses her lips at me, and mouths the word "ho" at me.

I make my way into the main living room.

"Here she is." Edward stands from where he's lounging on the couch. His expression is warm and appreciative. The sandy-haired woman beside him turns and beams at me, a full megawatt smile. She stands, too. She's impeccably attired in a camel-colored fine knit sweater dress with matching shoes. She looks groomed, elegant, beautiful, and inside I die a little, knowing I look such a mess.

"Mother, this is Isabella Swan. Isabella, this is Esme Cullen."

Mrs. Cullen holds her hand out to me. "What a pleasure to meet you," she murmurs and if I'm not mistaken there is wonder, and maybe stunned relief, in her voice and a warm glow in her amber eyes. I grasp her hand and I can't help but smile, returning her warmth.

"Mrs. Cullen."

"Call me Esme." She grins and Edward frowns. "Mrs. Cullen is my mother-in-law. So how did you two meet?" She looks questioningly at Edward. She cannot hide her curiosity.

"Isabella interviewed me for the student paper at WSU because I'm conferring the degrees there this week."

Holy crap. I'd forgotten that.

"So you are graduating this week?" Esme asks.

"Yes."

My cell phone starts to ring. *Rose, I bet*. "Excuse me." It's in the kitchen. I wander over and lean across the breakfast bar, not checking the number.

"Rose…"

"Bella!" Holy crap, it's Jake. He sounds desperate. "Where are you? I've been trying to contact you. I need to see you, to apologize for my behavior on Friday. Why haven't you returned my calls?"

"Look Jake, now's not a good time." I glance anxiously over at Edward who's watching me intently, his face impassive. I turn my back to him.

"Where are you? Rose is being so evasive," he whines.

"I'm in Seattle."

"What are you doing in Seattle? Are you with him?"

"Jake, I'll call you later. I can't talk to you now." I hang up.

I walk as nonchalantly as I can back to Edward and his mother. Esme is in full flow with Edward.

"…And Emmett called to say you were around. I haven't seen you for two weeks, Edward."

"Did he now?" Edward murmurs, gazing at me, his expression unreadable.

"I thought we might have lunch together darling, but I can see you have other plans, and I don't want to interrupt your day." She gathers up her long cream coat and turns to him, offering him her cheek. He kisses her briefly, sweetly. She doesn't touch him.

"I have to drive Isabella back to Portland."

"Of course, darling. Isabella, it's been such a pleasure. I do hope we meet again." She holds her hand out to me, her eyes glowing and I shake it gently.

Taylor appears from… *where?*

"Mrs. Cullen?" he asks.

"Thank you, Taylor." He escorts her from the room and through the double doors to the entrance. Taylor was here the whole time? How long has he been here? Where has he been?

Edward glares at me. "So the photographer called?"

Holy crap. "Yes."

"What did he want?"

"Just to apologize, you know… for Friday."

Edward narrows his eyes at me. "I see," he says simply.

Taylor reappears.

"Mr. Cullen, there's an issue with the Darfur shipment."

Edward nods curtly at him. "Get the helicopter back to Sea Tac and stand down the pilot."

"Yes, Sir."

Taylor nods at me. “Miss Swan.”

I smile tentatively back at him and he turns and leaves.

“Does he live here?”

“Yes.” His tone is clipped. *What is his problem?*

Edward heads over to the kitchen and picks up his BlackBerry, scrolling through some emails, I assume. His mouth presses in a hard line and he makes a call.

“Kate, what’s the issue?” he snaps.

He listens, watching me, as I stand in the middle of the huge room, wondering what to do with myself, feeling extraordinarily self-conscious and out of place.

“I’m not having either crew put at risk. No, cancel…. We’ll air drop instead…. Good.” He hangs up. The warmth in his eyes has disappeared. He looks forbidding, and with one quick glance at me, he heads into his study and returns a moment later. “This is the contract. Read it, and we’ll discuss it next weekend. And may I suggest you do some research, so you know what you’re letting yourself in for.” He pauses. “That’s if you agree. And I really hope you do,” he adds, his tone softer, anxious.

“Research?”

“You’ll be amazed what you can find on the Internet,” he murmurs.

Internet! I don’t have access to a computer, only Rose’s laptop and Newton’s doesn’t have one. Besides, this sort of ‘research’ is not something I can do at work surely?

“What is it?” he asks, cocking his head to one side.

“I don’t have a computer. I’ll see if I can use Rose’s laptop.”

He hands me a manila envelope.

“I’m sure I can… err, lend you one. Grab your things, we’ll drive back to Portland and grab some lunch on the way. I need to dress.”

“I’ll just make a call,” I murmur. I just want to hear Rose’s voice.

He frowns. “The photographer?” His jaw clenches and his eyes burn. I blink at him.

“I don’t like to share Miss Swan, remember that.” His quiet chilling tone is a warning, and with one long, cold look at me he heads back to the bedroom. Holy crap. *I just wanted to call Rose*, I want to call after him, but his sudden aloofness has left me paralyzed. What happened to the generous, relaxed, smiling man who was making love to me not half an hour ago?

Chapter 20

"Ready?" Edward asks as we stand by the double doors to the foyer.

I nod uncertainly. He's resumed his distant, polite, uptight persona, his mask definitely back up and on show. He's carrying a leather messenger bag. Why does he need that? Perhaps he's staying in Portland… and then I remember graduation. Oh yes, he'll be there on Thursday. He's wearing a black leather jacket. He certainly doesn't look like the multi-multi millionaire, billionaire, whateveraire, in these clothes. He looks like he's from the wrong side of the tracks. A badly behaved rock star or a catwalk model. I sigh inwardly, wishing I could have a tenth of his poise. He's so calm and controlled. Well, he seems to be.

Taylor is hovering in the background.

"Tomorrow then," he says to Taylor, who nods.

"Yes Sir. Which car are you taking Sir?"

He looks down at me briefly. "The R8."

"Safe trip Sir. Miss Swan." Taylor looks kindly at me, and I think I see a hint of pity hidden in the depths of his eyes.

No doubt he thinks I've succumbed to Mr. Cullen's dubious sexual habits. Well, not yet. Just his exceptional sexual habits, or perhaps sex is like that for everyone. I frown at the thought. I have no comparison, and I can't ask Rose, and that's something I am going to have to address with Edward. It's perfectly natural that I should talk to someone, and I can't talk to him if he is so open one minute and so standoffish the next.

Taylor holds the door open for us and ushers us through. Edward summons the elevator.

"What is it, Isabella?" he asks.

How does he know I'm chewing something over in my brain? He reaches up and pulls my chin. "Stop biting your lip or I will fuck you in the elevator… and I won't care who gets in with us."

I blush, but there's a hint of a smile around his lips. Finally, his mood seems to be shifting.

"Edward, I have a problem."

"Oh?" I have his full attention.

The elevator arrives. We walk in and Edward presses the button marked G.

"Well." I flush… *How to say this?* "I need to talk to Rose. I've so many questions, about sex, and you're just too involved. If you want me to do all these things… How do I know?" I pause, struggling to find the right words. "I just don't have any terms of reference."

He rolls his eyes at me. "Talk to her if you must." He sounds exasperated. "Just make sure she doesn't mention anything to Emmett."

I bristle at his insinuation. *Rose isn't like that*. "She wouldn't do that, and I wouldn't tell you anything she tells me about Emmett – if she were to tell me anything," I add quickly.

"Well, the difference is that I don't want to know about his sex life," Edward murmurs dryly. "Emmett, well he's a nosy bastard. But only about what we've done so far," he warns. "She'd probably have my balls if she knew what I wanted to do to you," he adds, so softly I'm not sure I'm supposed to hear it.

"Okay," I agree readily, smiling up at him, relieved. The thought of Rose and Edward's balls is not something I want to dwell on.

His lip quirks up at me and he shakes his head. "The sooner I have your submission the better, and we can stop all this," he murmurs.

"Stop all what?"

"You, defying me." He reaches down and cups my chin and plants a swift, sweet kiss on my lips as the doors to the elevator open. He grabs my hand and pulls me into the underground garage.

Me… Defying him… How?

He heads to an area beside the elevator. I can see the black 4x4 Mercedes, but it's the sleek black sporty number that blips open and lights up when he points the key fob at it. It's one of those cars that should have a very leggy blonde, wearing not much except maybe a sash, sprawled across the hood.

"Nice car," I murmur dryly.

He glances up at me, and grins. "I know," he says, and for a split second sweet, young, carefree Edward is back. It warms my heart. He looks so excited. Boys and their toys. I roll my eyes at him but can't stifle my smile. He opens the door for me and I climb in. It's low.

He moves around the car with easy grace and folds his long frame elegantly in beside me. *How does he do that?*

"So what sort of car is this?"

"It's an Audi R8 Spyder. It's a lovely day, we can take the roof down. There's a baseball cap in there. In fact, there should be two." He points to the glove box. "And sunglasses if you want them."

He starts the car and the engine roars behind us. He places his bag in the space behind our seats, presses a button, and the roof slowly reclines. With the flick of a switch, Bruce Springsteen surrounds us.

"Gotta love Bruce." He grins at me and eases the car out of the parking space, up the steep ramp and out into the bright May of Seattle. I reach into the glove box and retrieve the baseball caps. Mariners. Perhaps he likes baseball? I pass him a cap and he puts it on. I pass my ponytail through the back of mine and pull the peak down low.

People stare, everywhere. For a moment I think it's at him, and then a very paranoid part thinks everyone is looking at me because they know what I've been doing during the last twelve hours, but finally I realize it's the car. Edward seems oblivious. Lost in thought.

The traffic is light and we're soon on the I5 heading south, the wind in our hair. Bruce singing… *Tell me now baby is he good to you. Can he do to you the things I do. I can take you higher*. I flush as I listen to the words. Edward glances across at me. He's got his Ray Bans on. I can't see what he's thinking. His mouth twitches slightly and he reaches across and places his hand on my knee, squeezing gently. My breath hitches.

"Hungry?" he asks.

Not for food… "Not particularly."

His mouth tightens into that hard line.

"You must eat, Isabella," he chides. "I know a great place near Olympia. We'll stop there." He squeezes my knee again, then returns his hand to the steering wheel as he puts his foot down on the gas. Boy this car can move.

The restaurant is intimate. A wooden chalet in the middle of a forest. The décor is rustic: random chairs and tables with gingham tablecloths, wild flowers in little vases. *Cuisine Sauvage,* it boasts above the door.

"I've not been here for a while. We don't get a choice – they cook whatever they've caught or gathered." He raises his eyebrows in mock horror and I have to laugh.

The waitress takes our drinks order.

"Two glasses of the Pinot Grigio," Edward says authoritatively. I look at him, exasperated.

"What?" he snaps at me.

"I wanted a Diet Coke," I whisper.

His green eyes narrow at me.

"Trust me, the Pinot Grigio here's sublime. It will go well with the meal, whatever we get." And he smiles, his dazzling, head cocked to one side smile, my stomach pole vaults over my spleen, and I can't help but reflect his glorious smile back at him.

"My mother liked you," he says dryly.

"Really?"

"Oh yes. She's always thought I was gay."

My mouth drops open and I remember *that question from the interview. Oh no…* Anything but the memory of that question. I flush scarlet.

"Why did she think you were gay?" I whisper.

"Because she's never met me with a girl."

"Oh. Not even one of the fifteen?"

He smiles at me.

"You remembered. No, none of the fifteen."

"Oh…"

"You know, Isabella, it's been a weekend of firsts for me, too," he says quietly.

"Oh…"

"I've never slept with anyone, never had sex in my bed, never flown a girl in Echo Charlie, never introduced a woman to my mother. What are you doing to me?" His eyes burn at me, smoldering, green emeralds. Their intensity takes my breath away.

The waitress arrives with our glasses of wine and I immediately take a quick sip. Is he opening up, or just making a casual observation?

"I've really enjoyed this weekend," I murmur.

He narrows his eyes at me again. "Stop biting that lip," he growls. "Me too," he adds.

"What's vanilla sex?" I ask, if anything to distract myself from the intense, burning sexy look he's giving me.

He laughs. "Just straightforward sex, Isabella. No toys, no added extras. You know… Well actually you don't, but that's what it means."

"Oh." I thought it was chocolate fudge brownie sex that we had, with a cherry on the top, but hey, what do I know?

The waitress brings us soup. We both stare at it rather dubiously.

"Nettle soup," the waitress informs us before turning and flouncing back into the kitchen.

I take a tentative sip. It's delicious. Edward and I look up at each other at the same time with relief.

I giggle.

He cocks his head to one side. "That's a lovely sound," he murmurs, and he sips another spoonful of his soup.

"Why have you never had vanilla sex before? Have you always done… err, what you've done?" I ask, beyond intrigued.

He nods slowly. "Sort of," he says warily. He frowns for a moment and seems to be engaged in some kind of internal struggle. He glances up at me, a decision made. "One of my mother's friends seduced me when I was fifteen."

"Oh…" *Holy shit that's young.*

"She had very particular tastes. I was her submissive for six years," he shrugs.

"Oh…" My brain has frozen, stunned into inactivity by this admission.

“So I do know what it involves, Isabella.” His eyes glow with insight.

I stare at him, unable to articulate anything. Even my subconscious is silent.

“I didn’t really have a normal introduction to sex.”

Curiosity kicks in big time. “So you never dated anyone at college?”

He shakes his head. “No.”

The waitress takes our plates, interrupting us for a moment.

“Why?”

He smiles sardonically. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t want to. She was all I wanted, needed. And besides, she’d have beaten the shit out of me.” He smiles fondly at the memory.

Oh, this is way too much information... but I want more.

“So if she was a friend of your mother’s, how old was she?”

He smirks at me. “Old enough to know better.”

“Do you still see her?”

“Sometimes.”

“Do you still… err…?” I flush.

“No.” He smiles indulgently at me. “She’s a very good friend.”

“Oh. Does your mother know?”

He gives me a don’t-be-stupid stare. “Of course not.”

The waitress returns with venison, but my appetite has vanished completely. What a revelation. *Edward the submissive. Holy shit*. I take a large slug of Pinot Grigio – he’s right of course, it’s delicious. I have so much to think about, when I’m on my own, not distracted by his presence, his overwhelming aura. All Alpha Male. Now I have to throw this bombshell into the equation. *He knows what it’s like.*

"But it can't have been full time?" I'm confused.

"Well it was, though I didn't see her all the time. It was… difficult. After all, I was still at school, and then at college. Eat up, Isabella."

"I'm really not hungry Edward." *I am reeling from your disclosure.*

His expression turns grim. "Eat," he says quietly, too quietly.

I stare at him. This man, sexually abused as an adolescent. His tone is so threatening.

"Give me a moment," I say quietly back to him.

He blinks a couple of times. "Okay," he murmurs and he continues with his meal.

This is what it will be like if I try the relationship he wants, him ordering me around. I frown. *Do I want this?*

I reach for my knife and fork and tentatively cut into the venison. It's very tasty.

"Is this what our err… relationship will be like?" I whisper. "You ordering me around?" I can't quite bring myself to look at him.

"Yes." He swallows.

"I see."

"And what's more, you'll want me to," he adds softly.

I sincerely doubt that. I slice another piece of venison, holding it against my mouth.

"It's a big step," I murmur, and eat.

"It is." He closes his eyes briefly. "Isabella, you have to go with your gut. Do the research, read the contract – I'm happy to discuss any aspect. I'll be in Portland until Friday, if you want to talk about it before then." His words are coming at me in a rush. "Call me. Maybe we can have dinner – say, Wednesday? I really want to make this work. In fact, I've never wanted anything as much as I want this to work."

I am gazing into his eyes - they reflect his heartfelt, burning sincerity, his longing. And this is fundamentally what I don't grasp. *Why me?* Why not one of the fifteen? Will that be me? A number? Sixteen of sixteen… Sixteen of many?

"What happened to the fifteen?" I blurt.

He looks suddenly resigned, shaking his head slightly. “Various things, but it boils down to,” he pauses, struggling to find the words, I think. “Incompatibility,” he shrugs.

“And you think that I might be… err, compatible with you?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re not… seeing any of them any more?”

“No Isabella, I’m not. I am monogamous in my relationships.”

Oh… *this is news*. “I see.”

“Do the research, Isabella.”

I put my knife and fork down. I cannot eat any more.

“That’s it? That’s all you’re going to eat?”

I nod. He frowns at me, but chooses not to say anything. I breathe a small sigh of relief. My stomach is churning with all this new information and I’m feeling a little light headed from the wine. I watch as he devours everything on his plate. He eats like a horse. He must work out or something to stay in such great shape. The memory of the way his PJ’s hung from his hips comes unbidden into my mind, totally distracting. I squirm uncomfortably. He glances up at me, and I blush.

“I’d give anything to know what you’re thinking right at this moment,” he murmurs.

I blush further. He smiles, a wicked smile at me.

“I can guess,” he teases softly.

“I’m glad you can’t read my mind.”

“Your mind, no, Isabella, but your body? That I’ve gotten to know quite well since yesterday.” His voice is so suggestive. How does he switch so quickly from one mood to the next? He’s so mercurial. It’s hard to keep up.

He motions for the waitress and asks for the bill. Once he’s paid, he gazes at me again.

“Come.”

He holds his hand out to me and I take it as he leads me back to the car. This contact, flesh to flesh, it's what is so unexpected from him, normal, intimate. I just can't reconcile this ordinary, tender gesture with what he wants to do, in that room… The Red Room of pain.

We are both quiet on the drive from Olympia to Vancouver, both of us lost in our thoughts. When he pulls up outside my apartment it's five in the evening. The lights are on, Rose is at home. Packing, no doubt, unless Emmett is still there. He switches off the engine and I realize I'm going to have to leave him.

"Do you want to come in?" I ask tentatively. I don't want him to go. I want to prolong our time together.

"No. I have work to do," he says simply, gazing at me, his expression unfathomable. I stare down at my hands, as I knot my fingers together. Suddenly, I feel emotional. He's leaving.

He reaches over, takes one of my hands and slowly pulls it to his mouth, tenderly kissing the back of my hand. Such an old fashioned, sweet gesture. My heart leaps into my mouth.

"Thank you for this weekend, Isabella. It's been… sublime. Wednesday? I'll pick you up from work, from wherever?" he says softly.

"Wednesday," I whisper.

He kisses my hand again and places it gently back in my lap. He climbs out, comes around to my side, and opens the passenger door. Why do I feel suddenly bereft? A lump forms in my throat. I must not let him see me like this. I fix a smile on my face.

I clamber out and head up the path, knowing I have to face Rose, dreading facing Rose. I turn and gaze at him midway. Chin up, Swan, I chide myself.

"Oh, by the way – I'm wearing your underwear."

His mouth drops open, shocked. What a great reaction. My mood shifts immediately and I sashay into the house, part of me wanting to jump and punch the air. YES! My inner goddess is thrilled.

Chapter 21

Rose is in the living area packing up her books into crates.

"You're back… Where's Edward? How are you?" Her voice is fevered, anxious, and she bounds up to me, grabbing my shoulders, minutely analyzing my face before I've even said hello. *Crap*. Rose's persistence and tenacity, and me, in possession of a legal signed document saying I can't talk. It's not a healthy mix.

"Well, how was it? I couldn't stop thinking about you… after Emmett left, that is." She grins mischievously. I can't help but smile at her concern and her burning curiosity, but suddenly I feel shy. I blush. It was very… private. All of it. Seeing and knowing what Edward has to hide. But I have to give her some details, because she won't leave me alone until I do.

"It was good, Rose. Very good, I think," I say quietly, trying to hide my embarrassed tell-all smile.

"You think?"

"Well, I've got nothing to compare it to, have I?" I look at her apologetically, shrugging my shoulders slightly.

"Did he make you come?"

Holy crap. She's so blunt. I go scarlet.

"Yes," I mumble, exasperated.

Rose pulls me to the couch and we sit. She clasps my hands.

"Really? That *is* good." Rose looks at me in disbelief. "It was your first time. Wow, Edward must really know what he's doing."

Oh Rose, if only you knew.

"My first time was horrid," she continues, making a sad comedy face.

"Oh?" This has me interested, something she's never divulged before.

"Yes, Royce King, high school, dickless jock." She shudders. "He was rough. I wasn't ready. We were both drunk. You know, typical teenage post-prom disaster. Ugh. It took me months before I decided to have another go. And not with him. I never saw him again for

dust. Gutless wonder. What a way to lose your virginity. I was too young. You were right to have waited."

"Rose, that sounds awful."

Rose looks wistful. "Yeah. Took almost a year to have my first orgasm through penetrative sex, and there you are… First time?"

I nod shyly. My inner goddess sits in the lotus position looking serene except for the sly, self-congratulatory smile on her face.

"Well I'm glad you lost it to someone who knows their ass from their elbow." She winks at me. "So when are you seeing him again?"

"Wednesday. We're having dinner."

"So you still like him?"

"Yes, but I don't know about… the future."

"Why?"

"He's complicated Rose, you know. And he inhabits a very different world to mine." Great excuse. Believable, too. Better than "He's got a red room of pain and he wants to make me his sex slave."

"Oh please don't let this be about money, Bella. Emmett said it's very unusual for Edward to date anyone."

"Did he?" My voice hitches up several octaves. *Too obvious, Swan!* My subconscious glares at me, wagging her long skinny finger, then morphs into the scales of justice to remind me he could sue if I disclose too much. *Ha,what's he going to do, take all my money?* I must remember to Google *'penalties for breaching a non-disclosure agreement'* whilst I'm doing the rest of my 'research'. It's like I've been given a school assignment. Maybe I'll be graded. I flush, remembering my A for this morning's bath experiment.

"Bella, what is it?"

"Oh, I'm just remembering something Edward said."

"You look different," Rose says fondly.

"I feel different. Sore," I confess.

"Sore?"

"A little." I flush.

"Me too... Men," she says in mock disgust. "They're animals." And we both laugh.

"You're sore?" I exclaim.

"Yes… overuse."

I giggle. "Tell me about Emmett the over-user," I ask when I've stopped giggling. Oh, I can feel myself relaxing for the first time since I was in line at the bar, before the phone call that started all this – when I was admiring Mr Cullen from afar. Happy, uncomplicated days.

Rose blushes. *Oh My*. Rosalie Lillian Hale goes all Isabella Marie Swan on me. She gives me a dewy-eyed look. I've never seen her react this way to a man before. I think my jaw drops to the floor. *Where's Rose, what have you done with her?*

"Oh Bella," she gushes. "He's just so… everything… and when we…. oh… really good…" She can hardly string a sentence together, she's got it so bad.

"I think you're trying to tell me that you like him."

She nods, grinning like a lunatic. "And I'm seeing him on Saturday. He's going to help us move." She clasps her hands together, leaps up off the couch and pirouettes to the window. Wow. She obviously did ballet as a child. I had no idea.

Moving, crap. I'd forgotten all about that, even with the packing boxes surrounding us.

"Well, that's helpful of him," I say appreciatively. I can get to know him too. Perhaps he can give me more insight into his strange, disturbing brother. "So what did you do last night?"

She cocks her head at me and raises her eyebrows in a what-do-think-stupid? look.

"Pretty much what you did." She grins at me. "Are you okay, really? You look kind of overwhelmed."

"I feel kind of overwhelmed. Edward is very… intense."

"Yeah, I could see how he could be. But he was good to you?"

"Yes," I reassure her. "I'm really hungry. Shall I cook?"

She nods enthusiastically and stands to continue packing. “What do you want to do with the fourteen thousand dollar books?”

“I’m going to return them to him.”

“Really?”

“It’s a completely over-the-top gift. I can’t accept it, especially now.” I grin at Rose and she nods.

“I understand. A couple of letters came for you, and Jake has been calling every hour on the hour. He sounded desperate, not sure why.”

“Yes, I’ll call him,” I mutter evasively. If I tell Rose about Jake she’ll have him for breakfast.

I collect the letters from the dining table and open them quickly.

“Hey, I have interviews! The week after next, in Seattle, for intern placements!”

“For which publishing house?”

“For both of them!”

“I told you your GPA would open doors, Bella.”

Rose, of course, already has an internship set up at the Seattle Times. Her father knows someone, who knows someone…

“How does Emmett feel about you going away?”

Rose wanders into the kitchen, and for the first time this evening she looks disconsolate.

“He’s… understanding. Part of me doesn’t want to go, but it’s tempting to lie in the sun for a couple of weeks, and my mom is hanging in there, thinking this will be our last real family holiday before Jasper and I head off into the world of work.”

I have never left continental US. *One day, eh?* Rose is off to Barbados with her parents and her twin brother Jasper, for two whole weeks. I’ll be Roseless in our new apartment. That will be weird. Jasper is graduating, too. He’s also at WSU, but at Pullman, so we don’t get to see him often. I wonder briefly if I will before he goes. He’s such great fun.

The phone rings, jolting me from my reverie.

“That’ll be Jake.”

I sigh. I know I have to talk to him. I grab the phone.

“Hi.”

“Bella, you’re back!” Jake shouts his relief at me.

“Obviously.” Sarcasm drips from my voice and I roll my eyes at the phone.

He’s silent for a moment. “Look, can I see you? I’m so sorry about Friday night. I was drunk… and you… well. Bella, please forgive me.”

“Of course I forgive you, Jake. Just don’t do it again. You know I don’t feel like that about you.”

He sighs heavily, sadly. “I know Bella, I just thought… if I kissed you, it might change how you feel.”

“Jake, I love you dearly, I always will, you mean so much to me. You’re like… the brother I never had. That’s not going to change.” I hate to let him down, but it’s the truth.

“So you’re with him now?” He can’t hide the venom in his voice.

“Jake, I’m not with anybody.”

“But you spent the night with him.”

“Jake, that’s none of your business.”

“Is it the money?”

“Jake! Stop now, or I will hang up and never speak to you again.”

“Bella,” he whines and apologizes simultaneously.

I know he’s suffering. This is so hard to deal with at the moment. My plate is piled high with foreboding as it is.

“Maybe we can have a coffee or something tomorrow. Look, I’ll call you, Jake.” I try for conciliatory. He is my friend and I do love him. But right now, I just don’t need this.

“Tomorrow, then. You’ll call?” I can hear the hope in his voice twisting my heart.

"Yes. Goodnight, Jake." I hang up, not waiting for his response.

"What was that all about?" Rosalie almost has her hands on her hips.

I decide honesty is the best policy. She's looking more intractable than ever. "He made a pass at me on Friday."

"Jake? *And* Edward Cullen? Bella, your pheromones must be working overtime. What was the stupid fool thinking?" She shakes her head in disgust and goes back to her packing.

Forty-five minutes later we pause our packing for the house speciality… my lasagna. Rose opens a bottle of wine and we sit amongst the boxes eating, quaffing cheap red wine, and watching crap TV. This is normality. It's so grounding and so welcome after the last forty-eight hours of… madness. I eat my first unhurried, no nagging, peaceful meal in that time.*What is it about him and food?* Rose clears the dishes and I finish all the packing in the living room. We are left with the couch, the TV and the dining table. What more could we need? Just the kitchen and our bedrooms left to pack up and we have the rest of the week. Result!

The phone rings again. It's Emmett. Rose winks at me and skips off to her bedroom like she's fourteen. I know that she's meant to be writing her Valedictorian speech… looks like Emmett is more important. What is it about Cullen men? What is it that makes them totally distracting and all-consuming? I take another slug of wine. I'm becoming quite the aficionado.

I flip through the TV channels, and deep down I know I'm procrastinating. Burning a bright red hole in the side of my satchel is that contract. Do I have the strength and the wherewithal to read it tonight?

I put my head in my hands. Jake, Rose, Edward… they all want something from me. Rose and Jake, they're easy to deal with, but Edward, Edward takes a whole different league of handling, of understanding. Part of me wants to run and hide. I'm going to have to make a decision. What to do? His burning green eyes come into my mind's eye. His intense smoldering stare. My body tightens at the thought and I gasp. He's not even here and I'm turned on. It just can't be about sex. I think about his gentle banter this morning at breakfast, his joy at my delight with the helicopter ride, him playing the piano – the sweet soulful oh-so-sad music. He's such a complicated person. And now I have an insight as to why. A young man deprived of his adolescence, sexually abused by some evil Mrs. Robinson figure. No wonder he's old before his time. My heart fills with sadness at the thought of what he must have been through. I'm too naïve to know exactly what, but the research will sort that out. But do I really want to know? Do I want to explore this world I know nothing about? Do I want to… sink that low?

If I'd not met him, I'd still be sweetly and blissfully oblivious. And my mind drifts to last night, and this morning, and the incredible, physical, sensual sexuality I'd experienced. Do I want to say goodbye to that? *No!* screams my subconscious. My inner goddess nods in silent zen-like agreement with her.

Rose wanders back into the living room grinning from ear to ear. *Perhaps she's in love.* I gape at her. She's never behaved like this.

"Bella, I'm off to bed. I'm pretty tired."

"Me too, Rose."

She hugs me. "I'm glad you're back in one piece. There's something about Edward," she adds quietly, apologetically.

I give her a small, reassuring smile, all the while thinking *how the hell does she know?* This is what will make her a great journalist, her unfaltering intuition.

Collecting my satchel, I wander listlessly into my bedroom. I am weary, from all our carnal exertions of the last day, and from the complete and utter dilemma that I'm faced with. I sit on my bed and gingerly extract the manila envelope from the bag, turning it over and over in my hands. Do I really want to know the extent of Edward's depravity? It's so daunting. I take a deep breath and with my heart in my throat, I rip open the envelope.

Chapter 22

There are several papers inside the envelope. I take them all out, my heart still pounding, and I sit back on my bed and begin to read.

CONTRACT

Made this day of 2009 ("The Commencement Date")

BETWEEN

MR EDWARD CULLEN of 60/1 Escala, Seattle, WA 98889

("The Dominant")

MISS ISABELLA SWAN of 1114 SW Green Street, Apartment 7, Haven Heights, Vancouver, WA 98888

("The Submissive")

THE PARTIES AGREE AS FOLLOWS

1 The following are the terms of a binding contract between the Dominant and the Submissive.

FUNDAMENTAL TERMS

2 The fundamental purpose of this contract is to allow the Submissive to explore her sensuality and her limits safely, with due respect and regard for her needs, her limits and her wellbeing.

3 The Dominant and the Submissive agree and acknowledge that all that occurs under the terms of this contract will be consensual, confidential, and subject to the agreed limits and safety procedures set out in this contract. Additional limits and safety procedures may be agreed in writing.

4 The Dominant and the Submissive each warrant that they suffer from no sexual, serious, infectious or life-threatening illnesses including but not limited to HIV, Herpes, and Hepatitis. If during the Term (as defined below) or any extended term of this contract either party should be diagnosed with or become aware of any such illness he or she undertakes to

inform the other immediately and in any event prior to any form of physical contact between the parties.

5 Adherence to the above warranties, agreements and undertakings (and any additional limits and safety procedures agreed under clause 3 above) are fundamental to this contract. Any breach shall render it void with immediate effect and each party agrees to be fully responsible to the other for the consequence of any breach.

6 Everything in this contract must be read and interpreted in the light of the fundamental purpose and the fundamental terms set out in clauses 2-5 above.

ROLES

7 The Dominant shall take responsibility for the wellbeing and the proper training, guidance, and discipline of the Submissive. He shall decide the nature of such training, guidance, and discipline and the time and place of its administration, subject to the agreed terms, limitations and safety procedures set out in this contract or agreed additionally under clause 3 above.

8 If at any time the Dominant should fail to keep to the agreed terms, limitations and safety procedures set out in this contract or agreed additionally under clause 3 above, the Submissive is entitled to terminate this contract forthwith and to leave the service of the Dominant without notice.

9 Subject to that proviso and to clauses 2-5 above, the Submissive is to serve and obey the Dominant in all things. Subject to the agreed terms, limitations and safety procedures set out in this contract or agreed additionally under clause 3 above she shall without query or hesitation offer the Dominant such pleasure as he may require and she shall accept without query or hesitation his training, guidance and discipline in whatever form it may take.

COMMENCEMENT AND TERM

10 The Dominant and Submissive enter into this contract on The Commencement Date fully aware of its nature and undertake to abide by its conditions without exception.

11 This contract shall be effective for a period of three Calendar Months from The Commencement Date ("The Term"). On the expiry of The Term the parties shall discuss whether this contract and the arrangements they have made under this contract are satisfactory and whether the needs of each party have been met. Either party may propose the extension of this contract subject to adjustments to its terms, or to the arrangements they have made under it. In the absence of agreement to such extension this contract shall terminate and both parties shall be free to resume their lives separately.

AVAILABILITY

12 The Submissive will make herself available to the Dominant from Friday evenings through to Sunday afternoons each week during the Term at times to be specified by the Dominant ("the Allotted Times"). Further allocated time can be mutually agreed on an ad hoc basis.

13 The Dominant reserves the right to dismiss the Submissive from his service at any time and for any reason. The Submissive may request her release at any time, such request to be granted at the discretion of the Dominant subject only to the Submissive's rights under clauses 2-5 and 8 above.

LOCATION

14 The Submissive will make herself available during the Allotted Times and agreed additional times at locations to be determined by the Dominant. The Dominant will ensure that all travel costs incurred by the Submissive for that purpose are met by the Dominant.

SERVICE PROVISIONS

15 The following service provisions have been discussed and agreed and will be adhered to by both parties during the Term. Both parties accept that certain matters may arise which are not covered by the terms of this contract or the service provisions, or that certain matters may be renegotiated. In such circumstance further clauses may be proposed by way of amendment. Any further clauses or amendments must be agreed, documented and signed by both parties and shall be subject to the fundamental terms set out at clauses 2-5 above.

DOMINANT

15.1 The Dominant shall make the Submissive's health and safety a priority at all times. The Dominant shall not at any time require, request, allow or demand the Submissive to participate at the hands of the Dominant in the activities detailed in Appendix 2 or in any act that either party deems to be unsafe. The Dominant will not undertake or permit to be undertaken any action which could cause serious injury or any risk to the Submissive's life. The remaining sub-clauses of this clause 15 are to be read subject to this proviso and to the fundamental matters agreed in clauses 2-5 above.

15.2 The Dominant accepts the Submissive as his property to own, control, dominate, and discipline during the Term. The Dominant may use the Submissive's body at any time during the Allotted Times or any agreed additional times in any manner he deems fit, sexually or otherwise.

15.3 The Dominant shall provide the Submissive with all necessary training and guidance in how to properly serve the Dominant.

15.4 The Dominant shall maintain a stable and safe environment in which the Submissive may perform her duties in service of the Dominant.

15.5 The Dominant may discipline the Submissive as necessary to ensure the Submissive fully appreciates her role of subservience to the Dominant and to discourage unacceptable conduct. The Dominant may flog, spank, whip or corporally punish the Submissive as he sees fit, for purposes of discipline, for his own personal enjoyment, or for any other reason, which he is not obliged to provide.

15.6 In training and in the administration of discipline, the Dominant shall ensure that no permanent marks are made upon the Submissive's body nor any injuries incurred that may require medical attention.

15.7 In training and in the administration of discipline, the Dominant shall ensure that the discipline and the instruments used for the purposes of discipline are safe, shall not be used in such a way as to cause serious harm and shall not in any way exceed the limits defined and detailed in this contract.

15.8 In case of illness or injury, the Dominant shall care for the Submissive, seeing to her health and safety, encouraging and when necessary ordering medical attention when it is judged necessary by the Dominant.

15.9 The Dominant shall maintain his own good health and seek medical attention when necessary in order to maintain a risk-free environment

15.10 The Dominant shall not loan his Submissive to another Dominant.

15.11 The Dominant may restrain, handcuff, or bind the Submissive at any time during the Allotted Times or any agreed additional times for any reason and for extended periods of time, giving due regard to the health and safety of the Submissive.

15.12 The Dominant will ensure that all equipment used for the purposes of training and discipline shall be maintained in a clean, hygienic and safe state at all times.

SUBMISSIVE

15.13 The Submissive accepts the Dominant as her owner and renounces to the Dominant her freedom voluntarily, relinquishing all rights, personal choice and free will to the Dominant, with the understanding that she is now the sole property of the Dominant, to be dealt with as the Dominant pleases during the Term generally but specifically during the Allotted Times and any additional agreed allotted times.

15.14 The Submissive shall obey the rules ("the Rules") set out in Appendix 1 to this agreement.

15.15 The Submissive shall serve the Dominant in any way the Dominant sees fit and shall endeavour to please the Dominant at all times to the best of her ability.

15.16 The Submissive shall take all measures necessary to maintain her good health and shall request or seek medical attention whenever it is needed, keeping the Dominant informed at all times of any health issues that may arise.

15.17 The Submissive will ensure that she procures oral contraception and ensure that she takes it as and when prescribed to prevent any pregnancy.

15.18 The Submissive shall accept without question any and all disciplinary actions deemed necessary by the Dominant and remember her status and role in regard to the Dominant at all times.

15.19 The Submissive shall not touch or pleasure herself sexually without permission from the Dominant.

15.20 The Submissive shall submit to any sexual activity demanded by the Dominant and shall do without hesitation or argument.

15.21 The Submissive shall accept whippings, floggings, spankings, caning, paddling or any other discipline the Dominant should decide to administer, without hesitation, inquiry or complaint.

15.22 The Submissive shall not look directly into the eyes of the Dominant except when specifically instructed to do so. The Submissive shall keep her eyes cast down and maintain a quiet and respectful bearing in the presence of the Dominant.

15.23 The Submissive shall always conduct herself in a respectful manner to the Dominant and shall address him only as Sir, Mr. Cullen or such other title as the Dominant may direct.

15.24 The Submissive will not touch the Dominant without his express permission to do so.

ACTIVITIES

16 The Submissive shall not participate in activities or any sexual acts that either party deems to be unsafe or any activities detailed in Appendix 2.

17 The Dominant and the Submissive have discussed the activities set out in Appendix 3 and recorded in writing on Appendix 3 their agreement in respect of them.

SAFEWORDS

17 The Dominant and the Submissive recognize that the Dominant may make demands of the Submissive that cannot be met without incurring physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or other harm at the time the demands are made to the Submissive. In such circumstances related to this, the Submissive may make use of a safeword ("The Safeword (s)"). Two Safewords will be invoked depending on the severity of the demands.

18 The Safeword "Yellow" will be used to bring to the attention of the Dominant that the Submissive is close to her limit of endurance.

19 The Safeword "Red" will be used to bring to the attention of the Dominant that the Submissive cannot tolerate any further demands. When this word is said, the Dominant's action will cease completely with immediate effect.

CONCLUSION

20 We the undersigned have read and understood fully the provisions of this contract. We freely accept the terms of this contract and have acknowledged this by our signatures below.

_____

The Dominant: Edward Cullen

Date

_____

The Submissive: Isabella Swan

Date

APPENDIX 1

RULES

Obedience: The Submissive will obey any instructions given by The Dominant immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant excepting those activities which are outlined in hard limits (Appendix 2) She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

Sleep: The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of eight hours sleep a night when she is not with The Dominant.

Food: The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and wellbeing from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix 4). The Submissive will not snack between meals, with the exception of fruit.

Clothes: During the Term, the Submissive will wear clothing only approved by The Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for The Submissive, which The Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires the Submissive shall during the Term wear adornments the Dominant shall require, in the presence of the Dominant and any other time the Dominant deems fit.

Exercise: The Dominant shall provide The Submissive with a personal trainer four times a week in hour-long sessions at times to be mutually agreed between the personal trainer and The Submissive. The personal trainer will report to The Dominant on The Submissive's progress.

Personal Hygiene/Beauty: The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of The Dominant's choosing at times to be decided by The Dominant, and undergo whatever treatments The Dominant sees fit. All costs will be met by The Dominant.

Personal Safety: The Submissive will not drink to excess, smoke, take recreational drugs or put herself in any unnecessary danger.

Personal Qualities: The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relations with anyone other than The Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself in a respectful and modest manner at all times. She must recognize that her behaviour is a direct reflection on The Dominant. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds, wrongdoings and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above will be result in immediate punishment, the nature of which shall be determined by The Dominant.

APPENDIX 2

Hard Limits

No acts involving fire play.

No acts involving urination or defecation and the products thereof.

No acts involving needles, knives, cutting, piercing or blood.

No acts involving children or animals.

No acts that will leave any permanent marks on the skin.

No acts involving breath control.

No activity that involves the direct contact of electric current (whether alternating or direct), fire or flames to the body.

APPENDIX 3

Soft Limits

To be discussed and agreed between both parties:

Which of the following sexual acts are acceptable to the Submissive?

- Masturbation

- Fellatio

- Cunnilingus

- Vaginal intercourse

- Vaginal fisting

- Anal intercourse

- Anal fisting

Is swallowing semen acceptable to the Submissive?

Is the use of sex toys acceptable to the Submissive?

-Vibrators

- Dildos

- Butt Plugs

- Other

Is Bondage acceptable to the Submissive?

- Hands in front

- Hands behind back

- Ankles

- Knees

- Elbows

- Wrists to ankles

- Spreader bars

- Tied to furniture

- Blindfolding

- Gagging

- Bondage with Rope

- Bondage with Tape

- Bondage with handcuffs/metal restraints

- Bondage with leather cuffs

- Suspension

What is the Submissive's general attitude about receiving pain? Where 1 is likes intensely and 5 is dislikes intensely: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

How much pain does the submissive want to receive? Where 1 is none and 5 is severe: 1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5

Which of the following types of pain/punishment/discipline are acceptable to the Submissive?

-Spanking

- Paddling

- Whipping

- Caning

- Biting

- Nipple clamps

- Genital clamps

- Ice

- Hot wax

- Other types/methods of pain

Holy Fuck. I can't bring myself to even consider the food list. I swallow hard, my mouth dry, and read it again.

Chapter 23

My head is buzzing. How can I possibly agree to all this? And apparently it's for my benefit, *to explore my sensuality, my limits – safely*. Oh please! I scoff angrily.

Serve and obey in all things… All Things! I shake my head in disbelief. Actually, doesn't the marriage ceremony use those words… *obey*? This throws me. Do couples still say that? Only three months… Is that why there have been so many? He doesn't keep them for long? Or have they had enough after three months?

Every weekend? That's too much. I'll never see Rose, or whatever friends I may make at my new job… provided I get one. Perhaps I should have one weekend a month to myself. Perhaps when I have my period. That sounds… practical.

I am to be his property. Is that legal under the 13th Amendment? Thanks to my brief foray into constitutional law, I think ownership over another person is outlawed throughout the US. So that would make this whole contract null and void. Something to check on Google when Rose is out.

I shudder at the thought of being flogged or whipped. Spanking probably wouldn't be so bad, humiliating though, and tied up. Well, he did tie my hands together. That was… Well, it was hot… really hot, so perhaps that won't be so bad. He won't loan me to another dominant. Damn right he won't. That would be totally unacceptable. *Why am I even thinking about this?*

I can't look him in the eye. *How weird is that*? The only way I ever have any chance to see what he's thinking. Actually, who am I kidding, I never know what he's thinking, but I like looking into his eyes. He has beautiful eyes; captivating, intelligent, deep and dark. Dark with dominant secrets. I recall his burning emerald gaze and I press my thighs together, squirming.

And I can't touch him. Well, no surprise there. And these silly rules… No, no I can't do this. I put my head in my hands. This is no way to have a relationship. I need some sleep. I'm shattered. All the physical shenanigans I've been engaged in over the last twenty-four hours have been, frankly, exhausting. And mentally… Oh man this is so much to take on board. As Jake would say, a real mind-fuck. Perhaps in the morning this might not read like some awful bad joke.

I scramble up and change quickly. Perhaps I should borrow Rose's pink flannel pajamas. I feel like I need something cuddly and reassuring around me. I head to the bathroom in my t-shirt and sleep shorts and brush my teeth.

I stare at myself in the bathroom mirror. *You can't seriously be considering this*. My subconscious sounds sane and rational, not her usual snarky self. My inner goddess is jumping up and down, clapping her hands like a five-year-old.*Please, let's do this.* Otherwise we'll end up alone, with lots of cats, and your classic novels to keep you company.

The only man I've ever been interested in and he comes with a bloody contract and a whole world of issues. Well, at least I got my way this weekend. My inner goddess stops jumping and smiles serenely, like the cat that got the cream. *Oh yes,* she mouths, nodding at me smugly. I flush at the memory of his hands and his mouth on me, his body inside mine. I close my eyes as I feel the familiar delicious pull of my muscles from deep, deep down. I want to do that again, and again. Maybe if I just sign up for the sex… Would he go with that? I suspect not.

Am I submissive? Maybe I come across that way. Maybe I misled him in the interview. I'm shy, yes, but submissive? Well, I let Rose bully me. Is that the same?

And those soft limits… jeez. Well, at least they are up for discussion.

I wander listlessly back to my bedroom. This is too much to think about. I need a clear head, a fresh, morning approach to the problem. I put the offending documents back in my satchel. Tomorrow. Tomorrow is another day. I clamber into bed, switch off the light and lie staring up at the ceiling. Oh I wish I'd never met him. My inner goddess shakes her head at me. She and I know it's a lie. I have never felt as alive as I do now.

I close my eyes, and drift into a heavy sleep, with occasional dreams of four-poster beds and shackles and intense green eyes.

Rose wakes me the next day.

"Bella, I've been calling you. You must have been out cold."

My eyes reluctantly open to take her in. She's not just up, she's been for a run. I glance briefly at my alarm – it's eight in the morning. I've slept for a solid nine hours… heavenly.

"What is it?" I mumble sleepily.

"There's a man here with a delivery for you. You have to sign for it."

"What?"

“Come on. It looks really interesting.” She hops from foot to foot excitedly and bounds back into the living area.

I clamber out of bed and grab my dressing gown hanging on the back of my door.

A smart young man with an eighties ponytail is standing in our living room clasping a large box.

“Hi,” I mumble.

“I’ll make you some tea.” Rose scuttles off to the kitchen.

“Miss Swan?”

And I immediately know whom the parcel is from.

“Yes,” I answer cautiously.

“I have a package for you here, but I have to set it up and show you how to use it.”

“Really. At this time?”

“Only following orders, Ma’am.” He grins at me in a charming but professional, he’s not taking any crap kind of way...

Did he just call me Ma’am? Have I aged ten years overnight? If I have, it’s that contract. I can feel my mouth pucker in disgust.

“Okay, what is it?”

“It’s a MacBook.”

“Of course it is.” I roll my eyes.

“These aren’t available in the shops yet ma’am. The very latest from Apple.”

How come that does not surprise me? I sigh heavily.

“Just set it up on the dining table over there…”

I wander into the kitchen to join Rose.

“What is it?” she says all inquisitive and bright eyed and bushy tailed. She looks like she’s slept well, too.

"It's a laptop from Edward."

"Why's he sent you a laptop? You know you can use mine," she frowns.

Not for what he has in mind.

"Oh, it's only on loan. He wanted me to try it out." Even to my own ears my excuse sounds totally feeble. But Rose nods her assent. *Oh my*… I have hoodwinked Rosalie Hale… a first. She hands me my tea.

The Mac laptop is sleek, silver, and rather beautiful. It's also got an enormous screen. Edward Cullen likes scale. I think of his living area, in fact his whole apartment.

"It's got the latest OS and a full suite of programs, plus a one-point-five terabyte hard drive so you'll have plenty of room, thirty-two gigs of RAM. What are you planning to use it for?

"Uh… email?"

"Email!" he chokes, bemused, raising his eyebrows with a slightly sick look on his face.

"And maybe Internet research?" I shrug apologetically.

He sighs. "Well, this has full wireless N, and I've set it up with your Gmail account details. This baby is all ready to go… practically anywhere on the planet." He looks longingly at it.

"Gmail?"

"Your new email address."

I have an email address?

He points to an icon on the screen and continues to talk at me, but it's like white noise. I haven't got a clue what he's saying, and in all honestly, I'm just not interested. *Just tell me how to switch it on and off*, I'll figure out the rest. After all I've been using Rose's for four years. Rose whistles, impressed, when she sees it.

"Oh, this is next-generation tech." She raises her eyebrows at me. "Most women get flowers, or maybe jewelry," she says suggestively, trying to suppress a smile.

I scowl at her, but can't keep a straight face. We both burst into a fit of giggles and computer man looks at us, baffled. He finishes up and asks me to sign the delivery note.

As Rose shows him out, I sit with my cup of tea and open the email program. Sitting there is an email from Edward. My heart leaps into my mouth. *I have an email from Edward Cullen.* Nervously, I open it.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your New Computer
Date: 25 May 2009: 23:15
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan

I trust you slept well. I hope that you put this laptop to good use, as discussed.
I look forward to dinner, Wednesday.
Happy to answer any questions before then, via email, should you so desire.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I hit reply.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Your New Computer (on loan)
Date: 26 May 2009 08:20
To: Edward Cullen

I slept very well thank you, for some strange reason… *Sir.*
I understood that this computer was on loan, ergo, not mine.
Bella

Almost instantaneously, there is a response.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your New Computer (on loan)
Date: 26 May 2009 08:22
To: Isabella Swan

The computer is on loan. Indefinitely. *Miss Swan.*
I note from your tone that you have read the documentation I gave you.
Do you have any questions so far?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I can't help but grin.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Your New Computer (on loan)
Date: 26 May 2009 08:25
To: Edward Cullen

I have many questions, but not suitable for email, and some of us have to work for living. I do not want or need a computer indefinitely.
Until later, good day… *Sir.*
Bella

His reply again is instant, and it makes me smile.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your New Computer (on loan)
Date: 26 May 2009 08:26
To: Isabella Swan

Laters, Baby.

PS: I work for a living, too.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I shut the computer down, grinning like an idiot. How can I resist playful Edward? I am going to be late for work. Well, it is my last week, Mr. and Mrs. Newton will probably cut me some slack. I race into the shower, unable to shake my face-splitting grin. *He emailed me.* I feel like a small, giddy child. And all the contract angst fades. As I quickly wash my hair, I try and think what I could possibly ask him via email. Surely it's better to talk these things through, suppose someone hacked into his account? I flush at the thought. I dress quickly, shout a hasty goodbye to Rose and I'm off to work my last week at Newton's.

Jake phones at eleven.

"Hey, are we doing coffee?" He sounds like the old Jake, my friend, not a – what did Edward call him? Suitor. Ugh.

"Sure. I'm at work. Can you make it here for say twelve?"

"See you then."

He hangs up and I go back to restocking the walking socks and thinking about Edward Cullen and his contract.

Jake is punctual. In fact, he's early. He comes bounding into the shop, like a gamboling dark-eyed puppy.

"Bella." He smiles his dazzling, toothy all-American smile, and I can't help but not be angry with him anymore.

"Hi Jake." I hug him briefly. "I'm starving. I'll just let Mrs Newton know I'm going for lunch."

As we stroll to the local coffee shop, I slip my arm through Jake's. I'm so grateful for his… normality. Someone I know and understand.

"Hey Bells," he murmurs. "You've really forgiven me?"

"Jake, you know I can never stay mad at you for long."

He grins.

I can't wait to get home. The lure of emailing Edward, and maybe I can begin my research project. Rose is out, who knows where. I fire up the new laptop and open my email. Sure enough, there's an email from Edward sitting in the inbox. I'm practically bouncing out of my seat with glee.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Working for a living
Date: 26 May 2009 17:24
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan

I do hope you had a good day at work.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I hit reply.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Working for living

Date: 26 May 2009 17:48
To: Edward Cullen

Sir… I had a very good day at work.
Thank you
Bella

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Working for a living
Date: 26 May 2009 17:50
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan

Delighted you had a good day.
Whilst you are emailing, you are not researching…

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Working for living
Date: 26 May 2009 17:53
To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen… stop emailing me and I can start my assignment. I'd like another A.
Bella

I hug myself.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Working for a living
Date: 26 May 2009 17:55
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan

Stop emailing me, and do your assignment.
I'd like to award another A. The first one was so well deserved. ;)

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Edward Cullen just sent me a smiley. *Oh my…* I fire up Google.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Internet Research
Date: 26 May 2009 17:59
To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen, what would you suggest I put into a search engine?
Bella

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Internet Research
Date: 26 May 2009 18:02
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan

Always start with Wikipedia.
No more emails unless you have questions. Understood?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Internet Research
Date: 26 May 2009 18:04
To: Edward Cullen

Yes, *Sir*.
You are so bossy.
Bella

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Internet Research
Date: 26 May 2009 18:06
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella, you have no idea. Well, maybe an inkling now.
Do the work.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I type Submissive into Wikipedia.

Half an hour later I feel slight queasy, and frankly shocked to my core. Do I really want this stuff in my head? Jeez, is this what he gets up to in the Red Room of Pain? I sit staring at the screen, and part of me, a very moist and integral part of me – that I've only become acquainted with very recently – is seriously turned on. Oh my… Some of this stuff is HOT.

Chapter 24

For the first time in my life, I voluntarily go for a run. I find my nasty, never-used sneakers, some sweatpants, and a t-shirt. Put my hair in pigtails, blushing at the memories they bring back, and plug in my iPod. I can't sit in front of that marvel of technology and look at or read any more disturbing material. I need to expend some of this excess, enervating, energy. Quite frankly I have a mind to run to the Heathman hotel and just demand… sex. But that's five miles and I don't think I'll be able to run one, let alone five, and of course he might turn me down, which would be beyond humiliating. Snow Patrol blaring in my ears, I set off into the opal and aquamarine dusk. Rose is walking from her car as I head out of the door. She nearly drops her shopping when she sees me. Bella Swan in sneakers… I wave and don't stop for the inquisition. I need some serious alone time.

What if this storm ends?
And I don't see you
As you are now
Ever again

I pace through the park, the words of one of my favorite songs having more meaning to me than ever before.

I don't want to run
Just overwhelm me

What am I going to do?

I want pinned down
I want unsettled
Rattle cage after cage
Until my blood boils

I want him… but on his terms? I just don't know. Perhaps I should negotiate what I want. Go through that ridiculous contract line by line, and say what is acceptable and what isn't. My research has told me that legally it's unenforceable. He must know that. I figure that it just sets up the parameters of the relationship. Shows what I can expect from him and what he expects from me… my total submission. Am I prepared to give him that? Am I even capable?

I am plagued by one question - why is he like this? Is it because he was seduced at such a young age? I just don't know. He's still such a mystery.

I stop beside a large spruce and put my hands on my knees, breathing hard, dragging precious air into my lungs. Oh this feels good… cathartic. I can feel my resolve hardening. Yes, I need to tell him what's okay and what isn't. I need to email him my thoughts, and then we can discuss these on Wednesday. I take a deep cleansing breath and I jog back to the apartment.

Rose has been shopping as only she can for clothes for her holiday to Barbados. Mainly bikinis and matching sarongs. She looks fabulous in all of them, yet still she makes me sit and comment whilst she tries on each and every one. There are only so many ways one can say, *you look fabulous Rose*. She has a curvy, slim figure to die for. She doesn't do it on purpose, I know, but I haul my sorry, perspiration clad, old t-shirt, sweat pants and sneakers ass into my room on the pretext of packing up. Could I feel any more inadequate? I escape to my room with the awesome free technology and set it up on my desk. I email Edward.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Internet Research
Date: 26 May 2009 20:33
To: Edward Cullen

Okay I've seen enough.
It was nice knowing you.
Bella

I press send hugging myself, laughing at my little joke. Will he find it as funny? *Oh shit*. Probably not. Edward Cullen is not famed for his sense of humor. But I know it exists, I've experienced it. Oh no, perhaps I've gone too far. I wait for his answer. I wait… and wait. To distract myself from the anxiety, I start actually doing what I told Rose I would be doing – packing up my room. I begin by cramming my books into a box. By nine, I've heard nothing. *Perhaps he's out*. I pout petulantly as I plug my iPod earbuds in, listen to Snow Patrol and sit down at my small desk to re-read the contract and make my comments.

I don't know why I glance up, perhaps I catch a slight movement from the corner of my eye, I don't know… But when I do, he's standing in the doorway of my bedroom watching me intently. He's wearing his grey flannel pants and a white linen shirt, gently twirling his car keys. I pull my ear buds out and freeze. *Fuck!*

"Good evening, Isabella." His voice is cool, his expression completely guarded and unreadable. The capacity to speak deserts me. Damn Rose for letting him in here with no warning. Vaguely, I'm aware that I'm still in my sweats, un-showered, yukky… and he's… just gloriously yummy, his pants doing that hanging from the hips thing. And he's here in my bedroom…

"I felt that your email warranted a reply in person," he says dryly by way of explanation.

I open my mouth and then close it again, twice. The joke is on me. Never in this or any alternative universe did I expect him to drop everything and turn up here.

"May I sit?" he asks, his eyes now dancing with humor. *Thank heavens – maybe he'll see the funny side?*

I nod. The power of speech still remains elusive. *Edward Cullen is sitting on my bed.*

"I wondered what your bedroom would look like," he says.

I glance quickly around it, plotting an escape route. No, there's still only the door… or window. My room is functional but homely – white wicker, sparse furnishings, and a white iron double bed with a patchwork quilt, made by my mother when she was in her folksy American quilting phase. It's all pale blue and cream.

"It's very serene and peaceful in here," he murmurs.

Not at the moment… not with you here.

Finally, my medulla oblongata recalls its purpose, I breathe.

"How?"

He smiles at me. "I'm still at the Heathman."

I know that.

"Would you like a drink?" Politeness wins out over everything else I'd like to say.

"No thank you, Isabella." He smiles, a dazzling, crooked smile, his head cocked slightly to one side.

Well I might need one.

"So… it was *nice* knowing me?"

Holy crow. Is he *offended*? I stare down at my fingers. How am I going to dig myself out of this? If I tell him it was a joke, I don't think he'll be impressed.

"I thought you'd reply by email." My voice is small, pathetic.

"Are you biting your lower lip deliberately?" he asks darkly.

I blink up at him, gasping, freeing my lip.

“I wasn’t aware I was biting my lip,” I murmur softly. And my heart is pounding. I can feel that pull, that delicious electricity between us, charging. He’s sitting so close to me, his eyes dark jade, his elbows resting on his knees, legs apart. He leans forward and slowly undoes one of my pigtails, his fingers freeing my hair. My breathing is shallow and I cannot move. I watch, hypnotized as his hand moves to my second pigtail and he pulls the hair tie and loosens the plait with his long, skilled, fingers.

“So you decided on some exercise,” he breathes, his fingers gently pulling my hair as he tucks it behind my ear. “Why, Isabella?” His fingers circle my ear and very softly he tugs my earlobe, rhythmically. It’s so sexual…

“I needed time to think,” I whisper and I’m all rabbit/headlights, moth/flame, bird/snake… and he knows exactly what he’s doing to me.

“Think about what Isabella?”

“You…”

“And you decided that it was nice knowing me? Do you mean knowing me in the biblical sense?”

Oh shit. I flush. “I didn’t think you were familiar with the Bible.”

“I went to Sunday School, Isabella. It taught me a great deal.”

“I don’t remember reading about nipple clamps in the Bible. Perhaps you were taught from a modern translation.”

His lips arch with a trace of a smile, and my eyes are drawn to his beautiful, sculptured mouth.

“Well, I thought I should come and remind you how *nice* it was knowing me.”

Holy crap. I stare at him open mouthed, and his fingers move from my ear to my chin.

“What do you say to that, Miss Swan?”

His green eyes blaze at me, his challenge intrinsic in his stare. His lips are parted. He’s waiting, coiled to strike. Desire – acute, liquid and smoldering – combusts deep in my belly. I take pre-emptive action and launch myself at him. Somehow he moves, I have no idea how, and in the blink of an eye I’m on the bed pinned beneath him, my arms stretched out and held above my head, his free hand clutching my face and his mouth finds mine.

His tongue is in my mouth, claiming me, possessing me, and I revel in the force he uses. I can feel him against the length of my body. He wants *me*… and this does strange delicious things to my insides. Not Rose in her little bikinis, not one of the fifteen, not evil Mrs Robinson. Me. This beautiful man wants me. My inner goddess glows so bright she could light up Portland. He stops kissing me and I open my eyes to find him gazing down at me.

"Trust me?" he breathes. I nod, wide-eyed, my heart bouncing off my ribs, my blood thundering around my body.

He reaches down and from the pocket of his trousers he takes his grey silk tie, *that* grey tie, with the three thin silver stripes. He moves so quickly sitting astride me as he fastens my wrists together, but this time, he ties the other end of the tie to one of the spokes of my white iron headboard. He pulls at the tie… it's secure. I'm not going anywhere, I am tied to my bed, and I am so aroused.

He slides off me and stands beside the bed staring down at me, his eyes dark with want. His look is triumphant, mixed with relief.

"That's better," he murmurs and he smiles a wicked knowing smile.

He bends and starts undoing one of my sneakers. Oh no.

"No," I protest, trying to kick him off.

He stops. "If you struggle, I'll tie your feet too. If you make a noise Isabella, I will gag you. Keep quiet. Rosalie is probably outside listening right now."

Gag me! Rose! I shut up.

He removes my shoes, my socks, and very slowly peels off my sweat pants. Oh – what panties am I wearing? He lifts me and pulls the quilt and my duvet out from underneath me and places me back down, this time on the sheets.

"Now then." He licks his bottom lip slowly. "You're biting that lip, Isabella. You know the effect it has on me." He places his long index finger over my mouth, a warning.

Oh my… I can barely contain myself, lying here helpless, watching him move gracefully around my room, it's a heady aphrodisiac. He slowly removes his shoes and socks, and undoes his pants, and lifts his shirt off over his head.

"I think you've seen too much." He chuckles slyly.

He sits astride me again and pulls my t-shirt up. I think he's going to take it off me, but he rolls it up to my neck and then pulls it up so he can see my mouth, and my nose, but it covers my eyes, and because it's folded over, I cannot see anything through it.

"Hmmm…" He breathes appreciatively. "This just gets better and better. I'm just going to get a drink." He leans down and kisses me softly and I feel his weight shift off the bed, and the quiet creak of the bedroom door.

Get a drink… *Where? Here? Portland? Seattle?*

I strain to hear him. He's talking with Rose. Oh no, *he's practically naked*. What's she going to say? I hear a faint popping sound. What's that? He returns and I can hear ice tinkling against glass as it swirls in liquid. What kind of drink? He shuts the door and I hear him shuffle, removing more clothing, and now I know he's naked. He sits astride me again.

"Are you thirsty, Isabella?" he asks gently, teasingly.

"Yes," I breathe, because my mouth is suddenly parched.

I hear the ice clink against the glass and he puts it down again and leans down and kisses me, pouring a delicious crisp, liquid into my mouth as he does. It's white wine. It's so unexpected. *Hot*, though it's chilled, and Edward's lips are so cool.

"More?" he whispers.

I nod. It tastes all the more divine because it's been in *his* mouth. He leans down and I drink another mouthful from his lips. Oh my.

"Let's not go too far. We know your capacity for alcohol is limited, Isabella."

I can't help it, I grin at him and he leans down and I have another delicious mouthful.

He shifts so he's lying beside me. I can feel his erection at my hip. Oh, I want him inside me.

"Is this… *nice*?" he asks, but I can hear the edge in his voice. I tense. I can hear the glass again and he leans down and kisses me, depositing a small shard of ice in my mouth with a little wine. He slowly and leisurely trails chilled kisses down the center of my body, from the base of my throat, between my breasts, down my torso to my belly, and he pops a fragment of ice in my navel in a pool of cool, cold wine. It burns. I feel it all the way to my core. I gasp.

"Now you have to keep still," he whispers. "If you move, you'll get wine all over the bed, Isabella."

My hips flex automatically.

“Oh no. If you spill the wine, I will punish you, Miss Swan.”

I groan and desperately fight the urge to tilt my hips, pulling on my restraint. Oh no, *please.*

With one finger he pulls down my bra cups in turn, my breasts pushed up, vulnerable. He leans down and with his cool lips, he kisses and tugs at each of my nipples in turn. I fight my body as it tries to arch in response.

“How *nice* is this?” he breathes, blowing on one of my nipples. I hear another clink of ice and then I can feel it around my right nipple as he tugs the left one with his lips.

I moan, struggling not to move. It’s sweet, agonizing torture.

“If you spill the wine, I won’t let you come.”

“Oh, please… Edward, Sir… Please.” He’s driving me insane. I can *hear* him smile.

The ice in my navel is melting. I am beyond warm. Warm and chilled and wanting. Wanting him. Inside me. Now.

His cool fingers trail beneath my belly. Languidly. My skin is over sensitive, my hips flex automatically and I feel the now warmer liquid from my navel seep over my belly. Edward moves quickly, lapping it up with his tongue, kissing, biting me softly, sucking.

“Oh dear, Isabella, you moved. What will I do to you?”

I am now panting loudly. All I can concentrate on is his voice and his touch. Nothing else is real. Nothing else matters, nothing else registers on my radar. His fingers slip into my panties and I hear his unguarded gasp.

“Oh, Baby,” he murmurs and pushes two fingers inside me. “Ready for me so soon.” He moves them tantalizingly slowly, in, out, and I push against him, tilting my hips up.

“You are a greedy girl,” he scolds softly, and his thumb circles my clitoris and then presses down. I groan loudly, as my body bucks beneath his expert fingers. He reaches up and pushes the t-shirt over my head so I can see him as I blink in the soft light of my sidelight. I long to touch him.

“I want to touch you.” I breathe.

“I know,” he murmurs and he leans down and kisses me, his fingers still moving rhythmically inside me, his thumb circling and pressing. His other hand scoops my hair off

my head, and holds my head in place. His tongue mirrors the actions of his fingers, claiming me. My legs begin to stiffen as I push against his hand. He gentles his hand, so I'm brought back from the brink. He does this again and again. It's so frustrating… *Oh please, Edward*, I scream in my head.

"This is your punishment, so close and yet so far. Is this *nice*?" he breathes, in my ear.

I whimper, exhausted, pulling against my restraints. I feel so helpless, lost in an erotic torment.

"Please," I beg, and he finally takes pity on me.

"How shall I fuck you, Isabella?"

Oh… My body starts to quiver. He stills again.

"Please…"

"What do you want, Isabella?"

"You… now," I cry.

"Shall I fuck you this way, or this way, or this way? There's an endless choice," he says softly against my lips.

He withdraws his hand and reaches over to the bedside table for a foil packet. He kneels up between my legs and very slowly pulls my panties off, staring down at me, his eyes gleaming bright emerald. He puts on the condom. I watch, fascinated, mesmerized.

"How *nice* is this?" he says as he strokes himself.

"I meant it as a joke," I whimper. *Please fuck me Edward.*

He raises his eyebrows as his hand moves up and down his impressive length. "A joke?"

"Yes… Please, Edward," I beseech him.

"Are you laughing now?"

"No," I mewl. I am just one ball of sexual, tense, need…

He stares down at me and then grabs me suddenly and flips me over. It takes me by surprise and because my hands are tied, I have to support myself on my elbows. He pushes both my knees up the bed so my ass is in the air. He slaps me hard and before I can react, he plunges

inside me. I cry out… from the slap, from his sudden assault, and I come instantly again and again falling apart beneath him as he continues to slam deliciously into me. He doesn't stop. I'm spent. I can't take this, and he pounds on and on and on. Then I'm building again… Surely not… no.

"Come on Isabella, again," he growls through clenched teeth and unbelievably my body responds, convulsing around him as I climax anew, calling out his name. I shatter again into a million pieces and Edward stills, suddenly finally letting go, finding his release, no sound, and he collapses on top of me, breathing hard.

"How *nice* was that?" he asks through his gritted teeth.

Chapter 25

I lay panting and spent on the bed, eyes closed as he slowly pulls out of me. He rises immediately and dresses. When he's fully clothed, he climbs back on the bed and very gently undoes his tie and pulls my t-shirt off my hands completely. I flex my fingers and rub my wrists, then re-adjust my bra. He pulls the duvet and quilt over me.

I stare up at him completely dazed. He smirks down at me.

"That was really nice," I whisper smiling coyly up at him.

"There's that word again."

"You don't like that word?"

"No… It doesn't do it for me at all."

"Oh, I don't know, it seems to have a very beneficial effect on you."

"I'm a beneficial effect now am I? Could you wound my ego any more Miss Swan?"

"I don't think there's anything wrong with your ego." But even as I say it, I don't feel the conviction of my words. Something elusive crosses my mind, a fleeting thought, and it's lost before I can grasp it.

"If you think so…" His voice is soft.

He's lying beside me, fully clothed, his head propped up on his elbow, and I am only wearing my bra.

"Why don't you like to be touched?"

"I just don't." He reaches over and plants a soft kiss on my forehead. "So… that email was your idea of a joke."

I smile apologetically at him and shrug.

"I see. So you are still considering my proposition?"

"Your indecent proposal… Yes I am. I have issues though."

He grins down at me. "I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

"I was going to email them to you… but you kind of interrupted me."

"Coitus Interruptus."

"See, I knew you had a sense of humor somewhere in there." I smile at him.

"Only certain things are funny, Isabella. I thought you were saying no… no discussion at all." His voice drops.

"I don't know yet. I haven't made up my mind. Will you collar me?"

He raises his eyebrows. "You have been doing your research. I don't know, Isabella. I've never collared anyone."

Oh. Should I be surprised by this? I know so little about *the scene*… I don't know.

"Were you… collared?" I whisper.

"Yes."

"By Mrs. Robinson?"

"Mrs. Robinson!" he laughs, loudly, freely, and he looks so young and carefree his head thrown back. His laughter is infectious.

I grin back at him.

"I'll tell her you said that. She'll love it."

"You still talk to her regularly?" I can't keep the shock out of my voice.

"Yes." Serious now.

Oh. And part of me is suddenly insanely jealous. I'm disturbed by the depth of my feeling.

"I see." My voice is tight. "So you have someone you can discuss your alternative lifestyle with, but I'm not allowed."

He frowns down at me. "I don't think I've ever thought about it like that. Mrs. Robinson was part of that lifestyle. I told you, she's a good friend now. If you'd like, I can introduce you to one of my former subs. You could talk to her."

What? Is he deliberately trying to upset me?

"Is this *your* idea of a joke?

"No, Isabella." He looks down at me bemused as he shakes his head earnestly.

"No – I'll do this on my own, thank you very much," I snap at him, pulling the duvet up to my chin.

He stares at me… at sea, surprised. "Isabella, I…" He's lost for words. A first, I think. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"I'm not offended. I'm… appalled."

"Appalled?"

"I don't want to talk to one of your ex-girlfriends… slave… sub, whatever you call them."

"Isabella Swan – are you jealous?"

I flush, crimson.

"Are you staying?"

"I have a breakfast meeting tomorrow at the Heathman. Besides, I told you, I don't sleep with girlfriends, slaves, subs, or anyone. Friday and Saturday night were exceptions. It won't happen again." I can hear the resolve behind his soft, husky voice.

I purse my lips at him. "Well, I'm tired now."

"Are you kicking me out?" He raises his eyebrows at me, amused and a little dismayed.

"Yes."

"Well that's another first." He eyes me speculatively. "So nothing you want to discuss now? About the contract."

"No," I reply petulantly.

"God… I'd like to give you a good hiding. You'd feel a lot better, and so would I."

"You can't say things like that. I haven't signed anything yet."

"A man can dream, Isabella." He leans over me and grasps my chin. "Wednesday?" he murmurs and kisses me lightly on my lips.

"Wednesday," I agree. "I'll see you out. If you give me a minute..." I sit up and grab my t-shirt, pushing him out of the way. Amused and reluctant, he gets up off the bed.

"Please pass me my sweatpants."

He collects them from the floor and hands them to me. "Yes ma'am." He's trying, unsuccessfully, to hide his smile. I narrow my eyes at him as I slip the pants on. My hair is a state and I know I'll have to face the Rosalie Hale Inquisition after he's gone. Grabbing a hair tie, I walk to my bedroom door, opening it slightly, checking for Rose. She is not in the living area. I think I can hear her on the phone in her room. Edward follows me out. During the short walk from bedroom to front door my thoughts and feelings, ebb and flow, transforming. I'm no longer angry with him, I feel suddenly, unbearably shy. I don't want him to go. For the first time I'm wishing he was – *normal*. Wanting a normal relationship that doesn't need a ten-page agreement, a flogger and karabiners in his playroom ceiling. I open the door for him and stare down at my hands. This is the first time I have ever had sex in my home, and as sex goes, I think it was pretty damn fine, but now… I feel like a receptacle. An empty vessel to be filled at his whim. My subconscious shakes her head. *You wanted to run to the Heathman for sex – you had it express-delivered.* She crosses her arms and taps her foot with a what-are-you-complaining-about? look on her face. Edward stops in the doorway and clasps my chin, forcing my eyes to meet his. His brow creases slightly.

"You okay?" he asks tenderly as his thumb lightly caresses my bottom lip.

"Yes." I reply, though in all honesty I'm just not sure. I feel a paradigm shift. I know that if I do this thing with him, I will get hurt. He's not capable, interested or willing to offer me any more… and I want more. *Much more*. The surge of jealousy I felt only moments ago tells me that I have deeper feelings for him than I have admitted to myself.

"Wednesday," he confirms and leans forward and kisses me softly. But something changes whilst he's kissing me, his lips grow more urgent against mine, his hand moves up from my chin and he's holding the side of my head, his other hand on the other side. His breathing accelerates. He deepens the kiss, leaning into me. I put my hands on his arms. I want to run them through his hair, but I resist, knowing that he won't like it. He leans his forehead against mine, his eyes closed, his voice strained.

"Isabella," he whispers. "What are you doing to me?"

"I could say the same to you," I whisper back.

He takes a deep breath, kisses my forehead and leaves. He strolls purposefully down the path toward his car as he runs his hand through his hair. Glancing up as he opens his car door, he smiles his dazzling smile at me. My answering smile is weak, completely dazzled by him, and I'm reminded once more of Icarus soaring too close to the sun. I close the front

door as he climbs into his sporty car. I have an overwhelming urge to cry. A sad and lonely melancholy grips and tightens around my heart. I dash back to my bedroom and close the door, leaning against it, then slide to the floor, my head in my hands, as my tears begin to flow.

Rose knocks gently. “Bella?” she whispers.

I open the door. She takes one look at me and throws her arms around me.

“What’s wrong? What did that creepy good-looking bastard do?”

“Oh, Rose…nothing I didn’t want him to.”

She pulls me to my bed and we sit.

“Well you have dreadful sex hair.”

In spite of my poignant sadness I laugh. “It was good sex. Not dreadful at all.”

Rose smiles. “That’s better. Why are you crying? You never cry.” She retrieves my brush from the side table and sitting behind me very slowly starts brushing out the knots.

“I just don’t think our relationship is going to go anywhere.” I stare down at my fingers.

“I thought you said you were going to see him on Wednesday?”

“I am. That was our original plan.”

“So, why did he turn up here today?”

“I sent him an email.”

“Asking him to drop by?”

“No, saying I didn’t want to see him anymore.”

“And he turns up? Bella that’s genius.”

“Well actually, it was a joke.”

“Oh. Now I’m really confused.”

Patiently, I explain the essence of my email, without giving anything away.

“So you thought he’d reply by email.”

“Yes.”

“But instead he turns up here.”

“Yes.”

“I’d say he’s completely smitten with you.”

I frown at her. *Edward smitten with me? Hardly*. He’s just looking for a new toy. A convenient new toy that he can bed and do unspeakable things to… My heart tightens painfully. This is the reality.

“He came here to fuck me, that’s all.”

Rose gasps. "Who said romance was dead?" she whispers horrified.

I’ve shocked Rose… I didn’t think that was possible. I shrug apologetically. “He uses sex as a weapon.”

“Fuck you into submission?” She shakes her head disapprovingly.

I blink rapidly at her, and I can feel the blush as it spreads across my face. *Oh. Bang on, Rosalie Hale, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist.*

“Bella I don’t understand, you just let him make love to you?”

“No Rose, we don’t make love, we fuck. Edward’s terminology. He doesn’t do the love thing.”

“I knew there was something weird about him. He has commitment issues.”

I nod, as if in agreement. Inwardly, I pine. Oh, Rose... I wish I could tell you everything, everything about this strange, sad, kinky guy, and you could tell me to forget about him. Stop me being a fool. “I guess it’s all a little overwhelming,” I murmur and *that's the understatement of the year.*

Because I don’t want to talk about Edward any more, I ask her about Emmett. Rosalie’s whole demeanor changes at the mere mention of his name. She lights up from within, beaming at me.

“He’s coming over early Saturday to help load up.” She hugs the hairbrush – boy has she got it bad – and I feel a familiar faint stab of envy. Rose has found herself a normal man. But she looks so happy. I turn and hug her.

“Oh – I meant to say. Your father called while you were… err, occupied. Apparently Phil has sustained some injury so your Mom and he can’t make graduation. But your dad will be here Thursday. He wants you to call.”

"Oh... my Mom never called me. Is Phil okay?"

"Yes. Call her in the morning. It's late now."

“Thanks, Rose. I’m okay now. I’ll call Charlie in the morning, too. I think I’ll just turn in.”

She smiles at me, but I can see her eyes crinkle at the corners with concern.

After she’s gone, I sit and read the contract again, making more notes as I go. When I’ve finished I fire up the laptop and the email program, ready to respond.

There’s an email from Edward in my inbox.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: This evening
Date: 26 May 2009 23.00
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan

I look forward to receiving your notes on the contract.
Until then, sleep well sweet girl.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Issues
Date: 27 May 2009 00:20
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen

Here is my list of issues. I look forward to discussing them more fully at dinner on Wednesday.

The numbers refer to clauses:

2: Not sure why this is solely for MY benefit… ie to explore MY sensuality and limits. I'm sure I wouldn't need a ten-page contract to do that! Surely this is for YOUR benefit.

4: As you are aware, you are my only sexual partner. I don't take drugs and I've not had any blood transfusions. I'm probably safe. What about you?

8: I can terminate at any time if I don't think you're sticking to the agreed limits… okay. I like this.

9: Obey you in all things? Accept without hesitation your discipline? We need to talk about this.

11: One month trial period. Not three.

12: I cannot commit every weekend. I do have a life, or will have. Perhaps three out of four?

15.2: You taking ownership of me. My parents might object – and is this legal under the 13th Amendment? Using my body as you see fit sexually or otherwise… please define "or otherwise."

15.5: This whole discipline clause. I'm not sure I want to be whipped, flogged, or corporally punished. I am sure this would be in breach of clauses 2-5. And also, "for any other reason," that's just mean… and you told me you weren't a sadist.

15.10: Like loaning me out to someone else would ever be an option. But I'm glad it's here in black and white.

15.13: Hmmm – ownership again… see above.

15.14: The Rules… more on those later.

15.19: Touching myself without your permission… what's the problem with this? You know I don't do it anyway.

15.21: Discipline – Please see clause 15.5 above.

15.22: I can't look into your eyes? Why?

15.24: Why can't I touch you?

Rules:

Sleep – I'll agree to 7 hours.
Food – I am not eating food from a prescribed list. The food list goes or I do… Deal breaker.
Clothes – as long as I only have to wear your clothes when I'm with you... okay.
Exercise – We agreed 3 hours, this still says 4.

Soft Limits:

Can we go through all of these?
No Fisting of any kind.
What is suspension?
Genital Clamps… you have got to be kidding me.

Can you please let me know the arrangements for Wednesday? I am working until 5pm that day.

Good night.

Bella

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: This evening
Date: 27 May 2009 00.22
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan

That's a long list.
Why are you still up?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Issues
Date: 27 May 2009 00:24
To: Edward Cullen

Sir
If you recall, I was going through this list, when I was distracted and bedded by a passing control freak.
Goodnight
Bella

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: This evening
Date: 27 May 2009 00.26
To: Isabella Swan

GO TO BED ISABELLA.

Edward Cullen
CEO & Control Freak, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Oh… shouty capitals. I switch off. How can he intimidate me when he's six miles away? I shake my head. My heart still heavy, I climb into bed and fall instantly into a deep but troubled sleep.

Chapter 26

The following day, I call my mom when I get home from work. It's been a relatively peaceful day at Newton's, allowing me far too much time to think. I'm restless, nervous about my showdown with Mr. Control Freak tomorrow, and nagging at the back of my mind, I'm worried that perhaps I've been too negative in my response to the contract. Perhaps he'll call the whole thing off. My mom is oozing contrition – desperately sorry not to make my graduation. Phil has twisted some ligament which means he's hobbling all over the place. Honestly, he's as accident prone as I am. He's expected to make a full recovery, but it means he's resting up and my mother has to wait on him hand and sore foot.

"Bella honey, I'm so sorry," my mom whines down the phone.

"Mom, it's fine. Charlie will be there."

"Bella, you sound… distracted. Are you okay, baby?"

"Yes, Mom." *Oh if only you knew.* There's an obscenely rich guy I've met and he wants some kind of strange, kinky sexual relationship… in which I don't get a say in things.

"Have you met someone?"

"No Mom." I am so not going there right now.

"Well darling, I'll be thinking of you on Thursday. I love you. You know that, honey?"

I roll my eyes, but it still gives me a warm mushy feeling when she says it. Such precious words.

"Love you too, Mom. Say hi to Phil and I hope he gets better fast."

"Will do baby. Bye."

"Bye."

I have strayed into my bedroom with the phone. Idly, I switch the mean machine on and fire up the email program. There's an email from Edward, from late last night, or very early this morning, depending on your point of view. My heart rate spikes instantly and I can hear the blood pumping in my ears. Holy Crap. Perhaps he's said no – that's it – maybe he's canceling dinner. The thought is so painful, I dismiss it quickly and open the email.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your Issues
Date: 27 May 2009 01.27
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan

Following my more thorough examination of your issues, may I bring to your attention the definition of submissive, quoted here from dictionary dot com.

submissive [s*uh*b-**mis**-iv] – ***adjective***

1. inclined or ready to submit; unresistingly or humbly obedient: *submissive servants.*
2. marked by or indicating submission: *a submissive reply.*

Origin: 1580–90; submiss + -ive

Synonyms: 1. tractable, compliant, pliant, amenable. ***2.*** passive, resigned, patient, docile, tame, subdued.
Antonyms: 1. rebellious, disobedient.

Please bear this in mind for our meeting on Wednesday.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

My initial feeling is one of relief. He's willing to discuss my issues at least, and he still wants to meet tomorrow. After some thought, I reply.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: My Issues… What about Your Issues**?**
Date: 27 May 2009 18:29
To: Edward Cullen

Sir
Please note the date of origin: 1580-90. I would respectfully remind Sir that the year is 2009. We have come a long way since then.

May I offer a definition for *you* to consider for our meeting – again from dictionary dot com:

compromise [**kom**-pr*uh*-mahyz] - ***noun***

1. a settlement of differences by mutual concessions; an agreement reached by adjustment of conflicting or opposing claims, principles, etc., by reciprocal modification of demands. **2.**the result of such a settlement. **3.** something intermediate between different things: *The split-level is a compromise between a ranch house and a multistoried house*. **4.** an endangering, esp. of reputation; exposure to danger, suspicion, etc.: *a compromise of one's integrity*.

Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: What about My Issues?
Date: 27 May 2009 18:32
To: Isabella Swan

Good point, well made, as ever Miss Swan.
I shall collect you from your apartment at 7:00 tomorrow,

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: What about My Issues?
Date: 27 May 2009 18.40
To: Edward Cullen

Sir
I have a truck… I can drive. I would prefer to meet you somewhere.
Where shall I meet you? At your hotel at 7:00 pm?
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Stubborn Young Women
Date: 27 May 2009 18:43
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan

I refer to my email dated 27 May 2009 sent at 01:27 and the definition contained therein.
Do you ever think you'll be able to do what you're told?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Intractable Men
Date: 27 May 2009 18.49
To: Edward Cullen

Mr. Cullen
I would like to drive.
Please.
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Intractable Men
Date: 27 May 2009 18:52
To: Isabella Swan

Fine. My hotel at 7:00 pm
I'll meet you in the Marble Bar.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Even grumpy by email… Doesn't he understand that I may need to make a quick getaway?
Not that my truck is quick at all, but still – I need a means of escape.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Not So Intractable Men
Date: 27 May 2009 18.55
To: Edward Cullen

Thank you.
Bella x

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Exasperating Women
Date: 27 May 2009 18:59
To: Isabella Swan

You're welcome.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I call my dad, who is just about to watch a game, so our conversation is mercifully brief. He's driving down on Thursday for graduation and he wants to take me out afterwards for a meal. My heart swells talking to Charlie and a huge lump knots in my throat. Oh, Dad… and I can't wait to see him. It's been too long. His quiet fortitude is what I need now, what I miss. Maybe I can channel my inner Charlie for my meeting tomorrow.

Rose and I concentrate on packing, sharing a bottle of cheap red wine as we do. When I finally go to bed, having almost finished packing my room, I feel calmer. The physical activity of boxing everything up has been a welcome distraction, and I'm tired. I want a good night's sleep. In fact, I am so anxious for a good night's sleep I take some cold medicine and as soon as my head touches the pillow I'm out… sparko.

Mike is back from Princeton before he sets off for New York to start an internship with a financing company there. He follows me around the shop all day asking for a date. It's annoying.

"Mike, for the hundredth time… I have a date this evening."

"No you don't, you're just saying that to avoid me. You're always avoiding me."

Yes… you'd think you'd take the hint by now.

"Mike, I never thought it was a good idea to date the Boss's son."

"Well, you're finishing here on Friday. You're not working tomorrow."

"Yes, and I'll be in Seattle from Saturday and you'll be in New York soon. We couldn't get much further apart if we tried. Besides, I do have a date this evening."

"With Jake?"

"No."

"Who then?"

"Mike… oh," my sigh is exasperated. I can see he's not going to let this go. "Edward Cullen." I cannot help the annoyance in my voice. But it does the trick. Finally Mike shuts up. Oh, even *his* name renders people speechless.

"You have a date with Edward Cullen," he says, disbelief evident in his voice.

"Yes."

"Oh… I see." Mike looks positively crestfallen, stunned even, and a very small part resents that he should find this such a surprise. My inner goddess does too. She makes a very unattractive profane gesture with her fingers.

After that, he leaves me alone, and at five I am out of the door, pronto.

Rose has lent me two dresses and two pairs of shoes, for tonight and for graduation tomorrow. I really wish I could feel more enthused about clothes and make an extra effort. I decide on the plum-colored sheath dress for this evening. It's very demure and vaguely business-like. After all, I am negotiating a contract. I shower, shave my legs and underarms, wash my hair and then spend a good half hour drying it so that it falls in soft waves to my breasts and down my back. I slip a comb in to keep one side off my face and I apply mascara and some lip-gloss. I rarely wear make up - it intimidates me. None of my literary heroines had to deal with make-up. Maybe I'd know more about it if they had. I slip on the plum-colored stilettos that match the dress, and I'm ready by 6:30.

"Well?" I ask Rose.

She grins at me.

"Boy, you scrub up well Bella." Rose nods with approval. "You look really… hot."

"Hot! I'm going for demure and business-like."

"That too, but most of all hot. The dress really suits you and your coloring. The way it clings… keep it."

"Rose!" I scold.

"No… the whole package – looks good. You'll have him eating out of your hand."

My mouth presses in a hard line. O*h you so have that the wrong way around.*

“Wish me luck.”

“You need luck… for a date?”

“Yes, Rose.”

“Well then – good luck.” She hugs me and I turn to go.

I have to drive in my bare feet – my Chevy was not built to be driven by stiletto-wearing women. I pull up outside the Heathman at 6:58 precisely and hand my car keys to the valet for parking. He looks askance at my truck but I ignore him. Taking a deep breath and mentally girding my loins, I head into the hotel.

Edward is leaning casually against the bar, drinking a glass of white wine. He’s dressed in his customary white linen shirt, black jeans, black tie and black jacket. His hair is as tousled as ever. I sigh. He looks gorgeous as always. I stand for a few seconds in the entrance of the bar, gazing at him. Beyond beautiful. He glances – nervously, I think – towards the entrance and stills when he sees me. He blinks a couple of times and then smiles a slow, lazy, sexy smile that renders me speechless and all molten inside. Making a supreme effort not to bite my lip, I move forward aware that I, Bella Swan of Clumsyville, am on high stilettos. He walks gracefully over to meet me.

“You look stunning,” he murmurs as he leans down to briefly kiss my cheek. “A dress, Miss Swan, I approve.” Taking my arm, he leads me to a secluded booth and signals for the waiter.

“What would you like to drink?”

My lips quirk up in a quick sly smile as I sit and slide into the booth – well, at least he’s asking me.

“I’ll have what you’re having, please.” See! I can play nice and behave myself. He looks amused, orders another glass of Sancerre and slides in opposite me.

“They have an excellent wine cellar here,” he says, cocking his head to one side. Putting his elbows on the table he steeples his fingers, green eyes alive with some unreadable emotion. I can feel the familiar pull and charge from him, it connects somewhere deep inside me. I shift uncomfortably under his scrutiny, my heart palpitating. I must keep my cool.

“Are you nervous?” he asks softly.

“Yes.”

He leans forward. “Me too,” he whispers conspiratorially.

My eyes shoot up to meet his. *Him. Nervous. Never.* I blink at him and he smiles his adorable lopsided smile at me. The waiter arrives with my wine, a small dish of mixed nuts and another of olives.

"So how are we going to do this?" I ask. "Run through my points one by one?"

"Impatient as ever, Miss Swan."

"Well, I could ask you what you thought of the weather today?"

He smiles and his long fingers reach down to collect an olive. He puts it in his mouth, and I'm staring at his mouth, that mouth, that's been on me… all parts of me. I flush.

"I thought the weather was particularly unexceptional today," he smirks.

"Are you smirking at me, Mr. Cullen?"

"I am, Miss Swan."

"You know this contract is legally unenforceable."

"I am fully aware of that, Miss Swan."

"Were you going to tell me that at any point?"

He frowns at me. "You'd think I'd coerce you into something you don't want to do and then pretend that I have a legal hold over you?"

"Well… yes."

"You don't think very highly of me at all, do you?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Isabella, it doesn't matter if it's legal or not. It represents an arrangement that I would like to make with you. What I would like from you and what you can expect from me. If you don't like it, then don't sign. If you do sign, and then decide you don't like it, there are enough get-out clauses so you can walk away. Even if it were legally binding, do you think I'd drag you through the courts, if you did decide to run?"

I take a long draft of my wine. My sub-conscious taps me hard on the shoulder… you must keep your wits about you. *Don't drink too much.*

He continues, “Relationships like this are built on honesty and trust. If you don’t trust me – trust me to know how I’m affecting you, how far I can go with you, how far I can take you – if you can’t be honest with me, then we really can’t do this.”

Oh my. We’ve cut to the chase quickly. *How far he can take me.* Holy shit, What does that mean? As if I didn't know.

“So it’s quite simple, Isabella. Do you trust me or not?” His eyes are burning, fervent.

“Did you have similar discussions with err… the fifteen?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because they were all established submissives. They knew what they wanted out of a relationship with me and generally what I expected. With them it was just a question of fine-tuning the soft limits, details like that.”

“Is there a store you go to? Submissives R Us?”

He laughs. “Not exactly.”

“Then how?”

“Is that what you want to discuss? Or shall we get down to the nitty-gritty? Your… issues, as you say.”

I swallow. *Do I trust him?* Is that what this all comes down to… trust? Surely that should be a two-way thing. I remember his snit when I phoned Jake.

“Are you hungry?” he asks, distracting me from my thoughts.

Oh no… food. “No.”

“Have you eaten today?”

I stare at him. *Honesty.* Holy crap, he’s not going to like my answer. “No.” My voice is small.

He narrows his eyes at me. “You have to eat, Isabella. We can eat down here or in my suite. What would you prefer?”

“I think we should stay in public.”

He smiles sardonically. “Do you think that would stop me?” he says softly, a sensual warning.

My eyes widen and I swallow again. “I hope so.”

“Come, I have a private dining room booked. No public.” He smiles at me enigmatically and climbs out of the booth, holding his hand out to me.

“Bring your wine,” he murmurs.

I put my hand in his, slide out and stand up beside him. His hand reaches for my elbow. He leads me back through the bar and up the grand stairs to a mezzanine floor. A young man in full Heathman livery approaches us.

“Mr. Cullen, this way Sir.”

We follow him through a plush seating area to an intimate dining room. *Just one secluded table.* The room is small, but sumptuous. Beneath a shimmering chandelier, the table is all starched linen, crystal glasses, silver cutlery, and white rose bouquet. An old-world, sophisticated charm pervades the wood-paneled room. The waiter pulls out my chair and I sit. He places my napkin in my lap. Edward sits opposite me. I peek up at him.

“Don’t bite your lip,” he whispers.

I frown. Damn it, I don’t even know that I’m doing it.

“I’ve ordered already. I hope you don’t mind.”

Frankly I’m relieved, I’m not sure I can make any further decisions.

“No, that’s fine,” I acquiesce.

“It’s good to know that you can be amenable. Now, where were we?”

“The nitty-gritty.” I take another large sip of wine. It really is delicious. Edward Cullen does wine well. I remember the last sip of wine he gave me, in my bed. I blush at the intrusive thought.

“Yes… your issues.” He fishes into his inside jacket pocket and pulls out a piece of paper. My email. “Clause 2. Agreed. This is for the benefit of us both. I shall redraft.”

I blink at him. Holy shit, we are going to go through each of these points one at a time. I just don’t feel so brave face to face. He looks so earnest. I steel myself with another sip of my wine.

Edward continues, “My sexual health. Well, all of my previous partners have had blood tests, and I have regular tests every six months for all the health risks you mention. All my recent tests are clear. I have never taken drugs. In fact, I’m vehemently anti drugs. I have a strict no-tolerance policy with regards to drugs for all my employees and I insist on random drug testing.”

Wow, control freakery gone mad. I think I look shocked. I blink at him.

“I have never had any blood transfusions. Does that answer your question?”

I nod, impassive.

“Your next point, I mentioned earlier. You can walk away any time Isabella. I won’t stop you. If you go, however – that’s it. Just so you know.”

“Okay,” I answer softly. If I go, that's it. The thought is surprisingly painful.

The waiter arrives with our first course. How can I possibly eat? Oysters on a bed of ice… Crap. I’ve never eaten an oyster in my life.

“I hope you like oysters,” Edward’s voice is soft.

“I’ve never had one.”

“Really? Well.” He reaches for one. “All you do is tip and swallow. I think you can manage that…” He gazes at me, and I know what he’s referring to. I think I blush scarlet. He grins at me, squirts some lemon juice on to his oyster and then tips it into his mouth.

“Hmmm, delicious. Tastes of the sea.” He grins at me. “Go on,” he encourages.

“So I don’t chew it?”

“No, Isabella, you don’t.” His eyes are alight with humor. He looks so young like this. I bite my lip and his expression changes, instantly. He looks sternly at me. I reach across and pick up my first ever oyster. Okay… here goes nothing. I squirt some lemon juice on it and tip it up. It slips down my throat, all seawater, salt, the sharp tang of citrus and fleshiness… oooh. I lick my lips and he’s watching me intently.

“Well?”

“I’ll have another,” I say dryly.

“Good girl,” he says proudly.

“Did you choose these deliberately? Aren’t they known for their aphrodisiac qualities?”

“No, they are the first item on the menu. I don’t need an aphrodisiac near you. I think you know that, and I think you react the same way, near me,” he says simply. “So where were we?” He glances at my email as I reach for another oyster. *He reacts the same way. I effect him... Wow.*

“Obey me in all things. Yes, I want you to do that. I need you to that. Think of it as role-play Isabella.”

“But I’m worried you’ll hurt me.”

“Hurt you how?”

“Physically.” *And emotionally…*

“Do you really think I would do that? Go beyond any limit you can’t take?”

“You’ve said you’ve hurt someone before.”

“Yes, I have. It was a long time ago.”

“How did you hurt them?”

“I suspended them from my bedroom ceiling. In fact, that’s one of your questions. Suspension, that’s what the karabiners are for in the playroom. Rope play. One of the ropes was tied too tightly.”

I hold my hand up. “I don’t need to know any more. So you won’t suspend me then?”

“Not if you really don’t want to. You can make that a hard limit."

“Okay.”

“So obeying… Do you think you can manage that?”

He stares at me, his green eyes intense. The seconds tick by.

“I could try,” I whisper.

“Good." He smiles. "Now term. One month instead of three is no time at all, especially if you want a weekend away from me each month. I don’t think I’ll be able to stay away from you for that length of time. I can barely manage it now,” he pauses.

He can't stay away from me? What?

"How about, one day over one weekend per month you get to yourself, but I get a midweek night that week?"

"Okay…"

"And please… let's try it for three months. If it's not for you, then you can walk away anytime during that time..."

"Three months?" I'm feeling railroaded.

I take another large sip of wine and treat myself to another oyster. I could get to like these.

"The ownership thing… that's just terminology and goes back to the principle of obeying. It's to get you into the right frame of mind, to understand where I'm coming from. And I want you to know that as soon as you cross my threshold as my submissive, I will do what I like to you. You have to accept that, and willingly. That's why you have to trust me. I will fuck you, any time, any way, I want – anywhere I want. I will discipline you, because you will screw up. I will train you to please me. But I know you've not done this before. Initially, we'll take it slowly, and I will help you. We'll build up to various scenarios. I want you to trust me, but I know I have to earn your trust… and I will. The 'or otherwise' – again it's to help you get into the mindset, it means anything goes."

He's so passionate, hypnotizing, this is his obsession. I can't take my eyes off him. He really, really wants this. He stops talking and gazes at me.

"Still with me?" he whispers, his voice rich, warm and seductive. He takes a sip of his wine, his penetrating green eyes holding mine.

The waiter comes to the door and Edward subtly nods to him. He clears the table.

"Would you like some more wine?"

"I have to drive."

"Some water, then?"

I nod.

"Still or sparkling?"

"Sparkling, please."

The waiter leaves.

"You're very quiet."

"You're very verbose."

He smiles. "Discipline. There's a very fine line between pleasure and pain, Isabella. They are two sides of the same coin, one not existing without the other. I can show you how pleasurable pain can be. You don't believe me now, but this is what I mean about trust. There will be pain, but nothing that you can't handle. Again, it comes down to trust. *Do* you trust me, Bella?"

Bella!

"Yes, I do," I respond spontaneously, not thinking… because it's true. I *do* trust him.

"Well, then." He looks relieved. "The rest of this stuff is just details."

"Important details."

"Okay, let's talk through those."

My head is swimming with all his words. I should have brought Rose's mini disc player so I can listen back to this. So much information, so much to process. We're interrupted by the waiter bringing our entrees – black cod, asparagus, and crushed potatoes with a hollandaise sauce. I have never felt less like food.

"Hope you like fish," Edward says mildly.

I make a stab at my food and take a long drink of my sparkling water. I vehemently wish it was wine.

"The rules. Let's talk about them. The food is a deal breaker?"

"Yes."

"Can I modify to say that you will eat at least three meals a day?"

"No." I am so not backing down on this. No one is going to dictate to me what I eat. How I fuck, yes, but eat… no, no way.

He purses his lips at me.

"I need to know that you're not hungry."

I frown at him. “You’ll have to trust me.”

He gazes at me for a brief pause, and he relaxes. “Touché Miss Swan,” he says quietly. “I concede the food and the sleep.”

“Why can’t I look at you?”

“That’s a Dom/Sub thing… If you want to look at me, that’s fine.”

“Why can’t I touch you?”

“Because you can’t.”

His mouth sets in a mulish line.

“Is it because of Mrs. Robinson?”

He looks quizzically at me. “Why would you think that?” And immediately he understands. “You think she traumatized me?”

I nod.

“No, Isabella. She’s not the reason. Besides, Mrs. Robinson wouldn’t take any of that shit from me.”

Oh… but I have to. I pout. “So nothing to do with her.”

“No. And I don’t want you touching yourself, either.”

What? Oh yes, the no-masterbation clause. “Out of curiosity … why?”

“Because I want all your pleasure,” his voice is husky, but determined.

Oh… I have no answer for that. On one level it’s up there with "I want to bite that lip," on another… it’s so selfish. I frown and take a bite of cod, trying to assess mentally what concessions I’ve gained. The food, the sleep, I can look him in the eye. He’s going to take it slow, and we haven’t discussed soft limits. But I’m not sure I can face that over food.

“I’ve given you a great deal to think about, haven’t I?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to go through the soft limits now, too?”

“Not over dinner.”

He smiles. “Squeamish are you?”

“Something like that.”

“You’ve not eaten very much.”

“I’ve had enough.”

“Three oysters, four bites of cod and one asparagus stalk, no potatoes, no nuts, no olives… and you’ve not eaten all day. You said I could trust you.”

“Edward please, it’s not every day I sit through conversations like this.”

“I need you fit and healthy, Isabella.”

“I know.”

“And right now, I want to peel you out of that dress.”

Chapter 27

I swallow. *Peel me out of Rose's dress.* I feel the pull deep in my belly, muscles that I'm now more acquainted with clenching at his words. But I can't have this. His most potent weapon, used against me again. He's so good at sex, even I've figured this out.

"I don't think that's a good idea," I murmur quietly. "We haven't had dessert."

"You want dessert?" he snorts.

"Yes."

"You could be dessert," he says suggestively.

"I'm not sure I'm sweet enough."

"Isabella, you're deliciously sweet. I know."

"Edward. You use sex as a weapon. It really isn't fair," I whisper, staring down at my hands, and then looking directly at him.

He raises his eyebrows at me, surprised, and I can see he's considering my words. He strokes his chin thoughtfully.

"You're right. I do. In life, you use what you know, Isabella. Doesn't change how much I want you. Here. Now."

How can he seduce me just with his voice? I'm panting already, my heated blood rushing through my veins, my nerves tingling.

"I'd like to try something," he breathes.

I frown. He's just given me a shitload of stuff to process and now this.

"If you were my sub, you wouldn't have to think about this. It would be easy." His voice is soft, seductive. "All those decisions, all the wearying thought processes behind them. The, is this the right thing to do? Should this happen here? Can it happen now? You wouldn't have to worry about any of that detail. That's what I'd do as your dom. And right now I know you want me, Isabella."

I frown at him. How can he tell?

“I can tell because…"

Holy crow, he’s answering my unspoken question. Is he psychic as well?

“… your body gives you away. You’re pressing your thighs together, you’re flushed, and your breathing has changed.”

Oh this is too much.

“How do you know about my thighs?” My voice is low, disbelieving. They’re under the table for heaven’s sake.

“I felt the tablecloth move, and it’s a calculated guess based on years of experience. I’m right aren’t I?”

I flush and stare down at my hands. That’s what I’m hindered by in this game of seduction. He’s the only one who knows and understands the rules. I’m just too naïve and inexperienced. My only spheres of reference are Rose, and she doesn’t take any shit from men. My other references are all fictional: Elizabeth Bennett would be outraged, Jane Eyre too frightened, and Tess would succumb… just as I have.

“I haven’t finished my cod.”

“You’d prefer cold cod to me?”

My head jerks up to glare at him and his green eyes burn with compelling need.

“I thought you liked me clearing my plate.”

“Right now Miss Swan, I couldn’t give a fuck about your food.”

“Edward. You just don’t fight fair.”

“I know. I never have.”

My inner goddess frowns at me. You can do this, she coaxes – play this sex god at his own game. *Can I?* Okay, what to do… My inexperience an albatross around my neck. I pick up a spear of asparagus, gazing at him. I bite my lip and then very slowly put the tip of my cold asparagus in my mouth and suck it.

Edward’s eyes widen infinitesimally, but I notice.

“Isabella. What are you doing?”

I bite off the tip. “Eating my asparagus.”

Edward shifts in his seat. “I think you’re toying with me, Miss Swan.”

I feign innocence. “I’m just finishing my food, Mr. Cullen.”

The waiter chooses this moment to knock and, unbidden, enter. He glances briefly at Edward, who frowns at him but then nods, so the waiter clears our plates. The waiter’s arrival has broken the spell, and I have a precious moment of clarity. I have to go… This will only end one way if I stay, and I really need some boundaries after our intense conversation. As much as my body craves his touch, my mind is rebelling. I need some distance to think about all he’s said. I still haven’t made a decision, and his sexual allure and prowess doesn’t make it any easier.

“Would you like some dessert?” Edward asks, ever the gentleman, but his eyes still blaze at me.

“No, thank you. I think I should go.” I stare down at my hands.

“Go?” He can’t hide his surprise.

The waiter leaves hastily.

“Yes.” It’s the right decision. If I stay here, in this room with him, he will fuck me. I stand, purposefully. “We both have the graduation ceremony tomorrow.”

Edward stands automatically, revealing his years of ingrained civility. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Please… I have to.”

“Why?”

“Because you’ve given me so much to consider, and I need some distance.”

“I could make you stay,” his whisper threatens.

“Yes, you could easily, but I don’t want you to.”

He runs his hand through his hair, regarding me carefully.

“You know, when you fell into my office to interview me, you were all yes sir, no sir. I thought you were a natural born submissive. But quite frankly Isabella, I’m not sure you

have a submissive bone in your delectable body." He moves slowly towards me as his speaks, his voice tense.

"You may be right," I breathe.

"I want the chance to explore the possibility that you do," he murmurs staring down at me. He reaches up and caresses my face, his thumb tracing my lower lip. "I don't know any other way, Isabella. This is who I am."

"I know."

He leans down to kiss me, but pauses before his lips touch mine, his eyes searching mine, wanting, asking permission. I raise my lips to his and he kisses me, and because I don't know if I'll ever kiss him again, I let go. My hands are moving of their own accord and twisting into his hair, pulling him to me, my mouth opening, my tongue stroking his. His hand grasps the nape of my neck as he deepens the kiss, responding to my ardor. His other hand slides down my back and flattens at the base of my spine as he pushes me against his body.

"I can't persuade you to stay?" he breathes between kisses.

"No."

"Spend the night with me."

"And not touch you? No."

He groans. "You impossible girl." He pulls back, gazing down at me. "Why do I think you're telling me goodbye?"

"Because I'm leaving now."

"That's not what I mean and you know it."

"Edward, I have to think about this. I don't know if I can have the kind of relationship you want."

He closes his eyes and presses his forehead against mine, giving us both the opportunity to slow our breathing. After a moment, he kisses my forehead, inhales deeply, his nose in my hair, and then he releases me, stepping back.

"As you wish, Miss Swan," he says, his face impassive. "I'll escort you to the lobby." He holds out his hand. Leaning down, I grab my bag and put my hand in his.

Holy crap, this could be it. I follow him meekly down the grand stairs and into the lobby, my scalp prickling, my blood pumping. This could be the last goodbye, if I decide to say no. My heart contracts painfully in my chest. What a turnaround. What a difference a moment of clarity can make to a girl.

"Do you have your valet ticket?"

I fish into my clutch bag and hand him the ticket, which he gives to the doorman. I peek up at him as we stand waiting.

"Thank you for dinner," I murmur.

"It's a pleasure as always Miss Swan," he says politely, though he looks deep in thought, completely distracted. As I peer up at him, I commit his beautiful profile to memory and the idea that I might not see him again comes into my mind, unwelcome and too painful to contemplate.

He turns suddenly, staring down at me, his expression intense. "You're moving this weekend. If you make the right decision, can I see you on Sunday?" He sounds hesitant.

"Yes," I breathe.

Momentarily, he looks relieved. He frowns at me. "It's cooler now, don't you have a jacket?"

"No."

He shakes his head in despair and takes his jacket off.

"Here, I don't want you catching cold."

I blink up at him as he holds it open and as I hold my arms out behind me, I'm reminded of the time in his office when he slipped my coat onto my shoulders – the first time I met him – and the effect he had on me then. Nothing's changed, in fact it's more intense. His jacket is warm, far too big, and it smells of him. *Oh my…* delicious.

My truck pulls up outside. Edward's mouth drops open. "That's what you drive?" He's appalled. Taking my hand, he leads me outside. The valet jumps out and hands me my keys and Edward coolly palms him some money.

"Is this roadworthy?" He's glaring at me now.

"Yes."

"Will it make it to Seattle?"

"Yes. It will."

"Safely?"

"Yes," I snap, exasperated. "Okay it's old. But it's mine, and it's roadworthy. My father bought it for me."

"Oh Isabella, I think we can do better than this."

"What do you mean?" Realization dawns. "You are *not* buying me a car."

He glowers at me, his jaw tense. "We'll see," he says tightly.

He grimaces as he opens the driver's door and helps me in. I take my shoes off and roll down the window. He's gazing at me, his expression unfathomable… eyes dark, haunted.

"Drive safely," he says quietly.

"Goodbye Edward." My voice is hoarse from unbidden, unshed tears – *jeez, I'm not going to cry.* I give him a small smile. As I drive away, my chest constricts, my tears start to fall and I choke back a sob.

Soon tears are streaming down my face, and I really don't understand why I'm crying. I was holding my own. He explained everything. He was clear. He wants me, but the truth is, I need more. I need him to want me like I want and need him, and deep down I know that's not possible. I am just overwhelmed.

I don't even know how to categorize him. If I do this thing… will he be my boyfriend? Will I be able to introduce him to my friends? Go out to bars, the cinema, bowling even, with him? The truth is, I don't think I will. He won't let me touch him and he won't let me sleep with him. I know I've not had these things in my past, but I want them in my future. And that's not the future he envisages.

What if I do say yes, and in three months' time he says no, he's had enough of trying to mould me into something I'm not… how will I feel? I'll have emotionally invested three months, doing things that I'm not sure I want to do. And if he then says no, agreement over, how could I cope with that level of rejection? Perhaps it's best to back away now with what self-esteem I have reasonably intact.

But the thought of not seeing him again is agonizing. How has he gotten under my skin so quickly? It can't just be the sex, can it? I dash the tears from my eyes. I don't want to

examine my feelings for him. I'm frightened what I'll uncover if I do. *What am I going to do?*

I park up outside our duplex. No lights on. Rose must be out, and I'm relieved. I don't want her to catch me crying again. As I undress, I wake up the mean machine, and sitting in my inbox is a message from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen **Subject**: Tonight **Date:** 27 May 2009 22:01 **To:** Isabella Swan

I don't understand why you ran this evening. I sincerely hope I answered all your questions to your satisfaction. I know I have given you a great deal to consider and I fervently hope that you will give my proposal your serious consideration. I really want to make this work. We will take it slow.

Trust me.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

His email makes me weep more. I am not a merger. I am not an acquisition. Reading this, I might as well be. I don't reply. I just don't know what to say to him. Wrapping his jacket around me, I climb into bed. As I lie staring into the darkness I think of all the times he warned me off.

"Isabella you should stay away from me… I'd be no good for you"

"I don't do the girlfriend thing."

"I'm not a hearts and flowers kind of guy."

"I don't make love."

"This is all I know."

And as I weep into my pillow silently, it's this last idea I cling to. This is all I know, too. Perhaps together we can chart a new course.

Chapter 28

Edward is standing over me holding a plaited, leather riding-crop. He's wearing old, faded, ripped Levis…and that's all. He flicks the crop slowly into his palm as he gazes down at me. He's smiling, triumphant. I cannot move. I am naked and shackled, spread-eagled on a large four-poster bed. Reaching forward he trails the tip of the crop from my forehead down the length of my nose, so I can smell the leather, and over my parted, panting lips. He pushes the tip into my mouth so I can taste the smooth, rich leather.

"Suck," he commands softly and my mouth closes over the tip and I obey.

"Enough," he snaps and I'm panting once more as he pulls the crop out of my mouth, trails it down and under my chin, on down my neck to the hollow at the base of my throat. He swirls it slowly there and then continues to drag the tip down my body, along my sternum, between my breasts, over my torso down to my navel. I am panting, squirming, pulling against my restraints, which are biting into my wrists and my ankles. He swirls the tip around my navel and then continues to trail the leather tip south… through my pubic hair to my clitoris. He flicks the crop and it hits my sweet spot with a sharp slap and I come, gloriously, shouting my release. And abruptly I wake… sweating… panting… and feeling the aftershocks of my orgasm. Holy Fuck. I'm completely disorientated. What the hell just happened? I'm in my bedroom alone. Holy shit. How? Why? I sit up, quickly. Wow… It's morning. I glance at my alarm clock – eight o'clock. I run my fingers through my hair and put my head in my hands. I didn't know I could dream sex. Was it something I ate? Perhaps the oysters, and all my Internet research manifesting itself in my first wet dream. I am completely bewildered. I had no idea that I could orgasm in my sleep.

Rose is skipping around the kitchen when I stagger in.

"Bella, are you okay? You look odd. Is that Edward's jacket you're wearing?"

"I'm fine." Damn, should have checked in the mirror. I avoid her eyes. I'm still reeling from my morning's… event. "Yes, this is Edward's jacket."

She frowns at me. "Did you sleep?"

"Not very well."

I head for the kettle. I need tea.

"How was dinner?"

So it begins…

"Well, we had oysters. Followed by cod, so I'd say it was fishy."

"Ugh, I hate oysters. And I don't want to know about the food. How was Edward? What did you talk about?"

"He was… attentive," I pause. What can I say? His HIV status is clear, he's heavily into role-play, wants me to obey his every command, he hurt someone he tied to his bedroom ceiling, and he wanted to fuck me in the private dining room. Would that be a good summary? I try desperately to remember something from my encounter with Edward that I can discuss with Rose. "He doesn't approve of my truck."

"Well, who does, Bella? That's old news. Why are you being so coy? Give it up, girlfriend."

"Oh Rose… we talked about lots things. You know, how fussy he is about food. Oh, he liked your dress incidentally." The kettle has boiled so I make myself some tea. "Do you want tea? Would you like me to hear your speech for today?"

"Yes please. I worked on it last night over at Leah's. I'll go fetch it. And yes, I'd love some tea." Rose races out of the kitchen.

Phew… Rosalie Hale derailed. I slice a bagel and pop it into the toaster. I flush remembering my very vivid dream. Hmmm. Last night it took me so long to get to sleep, my various options racing through my mind, preoccupying me. I am so confused. Edward's idea of a relationship is more like a job offer. It has set hours, a job description and a rather harsh grievance procedure. It's not how I envisaged my first romance – but, of course, Edward doesn't do romance. If I tell him I want more, he may say no and I could jeopardize what he has offered. And this is what concerns me most, because I don't want to lose him. But I'm not sure I have the stomach to be his submissive. Deep down, it's the canes and whips that put me off. I'm a physical coward and I will go a long way to avoid pain. I think of my dream… *is that what it would be like?* My inner goddess jumps up and down with cheerleading pom-poms shouting yes at me.

Rose comes back into the kitchen with her laptop. I concentrate on my bagel and listen patiently as she runs through her Valedictorian speech.

I am dressed and ready when Charlie arrives. I open the front door and see him standing in front of me in his ill-fitting suit, and feel a warm surge of gratitude and love for this uncomplicated man. I throw my arms around him in a very uncharacteristic display of affection. He's completely bemused.

"Hey Bells, I'm pleased to see you too," he mutters as he awkwardly hugs me.

Setting me back he looks down at me. "You okay kid?" he asks, his brow furrowed.

"Of course Dad, can't a girl be pleased to see her old man?"

He smiles down at me and follows me into the living area.

"You look good," he says.

"This is Rose's dress." I glance down at the grey chiffon halter neck dress.

He frowns. "Where is Rose?"

"She's gone up to campus. She's giving a speech, so she has to be early."

"Shall we head on over?"

"Dad, we have half an hour. Would you like some tea? And you can tell me how everyone in Forks is getting along. How was the drive down?"

Charlie pulls his truck into the campus parking lot and we follow the stream of humanity, dotted with ubiquitous black and red gowns, heading towards the sports auditorium.

"Good luck Bells. You seem awfully nervous. Do you have to do anything?"

Holy crap. Why has Charlie picked today to be so observant?

"No Dad. It's a big day." *And I'm going to see him.*

"Yeah, my baby girl has gotten a degree. I'm proud of you Bella."

"Aw… thanks Dad."

The sports auditorium is crowded. Charlie has gone to sit with the other parents and well wishers in the raked seating whilst I make my way to my seat. I'm wearing my black gown and my cap now and I feel protected by them… anonymous. There is no one on the stage yet but I can't seem to steady my nerves. My heart is pounding and my breathing is shallow. He's here, somewhere. I wonder if Rose is talking to him, interrogating him maybe. I make my way to my seat amongst fellow students whose surnames also begin with S. I am in the second row, affording me yet more anonymity. I glance behind me, spot Charlie sat up high in the bleachers, and give him a wave. He gives me a smile back and self-consciously raises his hand in a half wave, half salute back at me. It's good to see him, and I sit and wait.

The auditorium fills quickly and the buzz of excited voices gets louder and louder. The row of seats in front fills. On either side of me I am joined by two girls whom I don't know, from a different faculty. They're obviously close friends and talk across me excitedly.

At eleven precisely the Chancellor appears from behind the stage, followed by the three Vice Chancellors, and then the senior professors, all decked out in their black and red regalia. We stand and applaud our teaching staff. Some professors nod and wave, others look bored and Professor Caius – my tutor and my favorite teacher – looks like he's just fallen out of bed, as usual. Last on to the stage are Rose and Edward. Edward stands out in his bespoke grey suit, copper-colored hair glinting under the auditorium lights. He looks so serious and so very self-contained. As he sits, he undoes his single-breasted jacket and I glimpse his tie. *Holy shit… that tie!* I rub my wrists reflexively. I cannot take my eyes off him – his beauty as distracting as ever – and he's wearing that tie. On purpose no doubt. I can feel my mouth press into a hard line. The audience sits down and the applause ceases.

"Look at him!" One of the girls beside me breathes enthusiastically to her friend.

"He's hot."

I stiffen. I'm sure they're not talking about Professor Caius.

"Must be Edward Cullen."

"Is he single?"

I bristle. "I don't think so," I murmur.

"Oh." Both girls look at me in surprise.

"I think he's gay," I mutter.

"Oh. What a shame," one of the girls groans.

As the Chancellor gets to his feet and kicks off the proceedings with his speech I can see Edward subtly scanning the hall. I sink into my seat, hunching my shoulders, trying to make myself as inconspicuous as possible. I fail miserably as two seconds later his green eyes find mine. He stares at me, his face impassive, completely inscrutable. I squirm uncomfortably, hypnotized by his glare as I feel a slow flush spread across my face. Unbidden, I recall my dream from this morning, and my belly muscles do the delectable clench thing. I gasp slightly. I can see the shadow of a smile cross his lips, but it's fleeting. He briefly closes his eyes and on opening them resumes his indifferent expression. Following a swift glance up at the Chancellor, he stares ahead, focusing on the WSU emblem hung above the entrance. He doesn't turn his eyes towards me again. The Chancellor drones on, and Edward still doesn't look at me, he just stares fixedly ahead.

Why won't he look at me? Perhaps he's changed his mind? I start to feel a wave of unease. Perhaps walking out on him last night was the end for him too. He's bored of waiting for me to make up my mind. Oh no. I could have completely blown it. I remember his email last night. Maybe he's mad that I haven't replied.

Suddenly, the room erupts into applause and Miss Rosalie Hale has taken the stage. The Chancellor sits and Rose tosses her lovely long blond hair behind her as she places her papers on the lectern. She takes her time, not intimidated by a thousand people gawping at her. She smiles when she's ready, looks up at the captivated throng, and launches eloquently into her speech. She's so composed and funny. The girls beside me erupt on cue at her first joke. *Oh Rosalie Hale, you can deliver a good line*. I feel so proud of her at that moment, my errant thoughts of Edward pushed to one side. Even though I have heard her speech before, I listen carefully. She commands the room and takes her audience with her. Her theme is What Next After College? Oh, what next indeed. Edward is watching Rose, his eyebrows slightly raised – in surprise, I think. Yes, it could have been Rose that went to interview him. And it could have been Rose that he was now making indecent proposals to. Beautiful Rose and beautiful Edward, together. I could be like the two girls beside me, admiring him from afar. I know Rose wouldn't have given him the time of day. What did she call him the other day? Creepy. The thought of a confrontation between Rose and Edward makes me uncomfortable. I have to say I don't know which of them I would put my money on.

Rose concludes her speech with a flourish and spontaneously everyone stands, applauding and cheering, her first standing ovation. I beam at her and cheer and she grins back at me. Good job, Rose. She sits as do the audience and the Chancellor rises and introduces Edward. Holy shit, Edward's going to make a speech. CEO of his own company. A self-made man.

"And also a major benefactor to our University… Please welcome, Mr. Edward Cullen."

The Chancellor pumps Edward's hand and there is a swell of polite applause. My heart's in my throat. He approaches the lectern and surveys the hall. He looks so confident standing in front of us all, as Rose did before him. The two girls beside me lean in, enraptured. In fact, I think most of the female members of the audience inch closer, and a few of the men. He begins, his voice, soft, measured, mesmerizing.

"I'm profoundly grateful and touched by the great compliment accorded to me by the authorities of WSU today. It offers me a rare opportunity to talk about the impressive work of the environmental science department here at the University. Our aim is to develop viable and ecologically sustainable methods of farming for third world countries; our ultimate goal is to help eradicate hunger and poverty across the globe. Over a billion people, mainly in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America, live in abject poverty. Agricultural dysfunction is rife within these parts of the world and the result is

ecological and social destruction. I have known what it's like to be profoundly hungry. This is a very personal journey for me."

My jaw falls to the floor. *What?* Edward was hungry, once. Well, that explains a great deal. And I recall the interview; he really does want to feed the world. I desperately rack my brains to remember what Rose had written in her article. Adopted at age four, I think. I can't imagine that Esme starved him, so it must have been before then, as a little boy. I swallow, my heart constricting at the thought of a hungry copper-haired toddler. Holy crap, what kind of life did he have before the Cullens got hold of him, rescued him? I'm seized by a sense of raw outrage. Poor fucked-up, kinky, philanthropic Edward – though I'm sure he wouldn't see himself this way and would repel any sympathy or pity. Abruptly, everyone bursts into applause and stands. I follow, though I haven't heard half his speech. He's doing all of these good work, running a huge company and chasing me at the same time. It's overwhelming. I remember the brief snippets of conversations he's had about Darfur. It all falls into place. *Food.*

He smiles briefly at the warm applause – even Rose is clapping – and then resumes his seat. He doesn't look my way at all, and I'm all off-kilter trying to assimilate this new information about him.

One of the Vice Chancellors rises and we begin the long tedious process of collecting our degrees. There are over six hundred to be given out and it takes just over an hour before I hear my name. I make my way up to the stage between the two giggling girls.

Edward gazes down at me, his gaze warm but guarded.

"Congratulations Miss Swan," he says as he shakes my hand, squeezing it gently. I feel the charge of his flesh on mine. "Do you have a problem with your laptop?"

I frown as he hands me my degree.

"No," I breathe.

"Then you *are* ignoring my emails?"

"I only saw the mergers and acquisitions one…"

He looks quizzically at me.

"Later," he says and I have to move on because I'm holding up the line.

I go back to my seat. Emails? He must have sent another. What did that say?

The ceremony takes another thirty minutes to conclude. It seems interminable. Finally the Chancellor leads the faculty members off the stage, to yet more rousing applause, preceded by Edward and Rose. Edward does not glance at me, even though I'm willing him to do it. My inner goddess is not pleased.

As I stand and wait for our row to disperse, Rose calls to me. She's heading my way from behind the stage.

"Edward wants to talk to you," she shouts.

The two girls who are now standing beside me turn and gape at me.

"He's sent me out here," she continues.

Oh… "Your speech was great Rose."

"It was, wasn't it?" she beams. "Are you coming? He can be very insistent." She rolls her eyes at me.

I grin at her. "You have no idea. I can't leave Charlie for long." I glance up at Charlie and hold my fingers up indicating five minutes. He nods and gives me an okay sign, and I follow Rose into the corridor behind the stage. Edward is talking to the Chancellor and two of the teaching staff. He looks up when he sees me.

"Excuse me gentlemen," I hear him murmur.

He comes towards me and smiles briefly at Rose.

"Thank you," he says and before she can reply he takes my hand and leads me into what looks like a men's locker room.

He checks to see if it's empty and then he locks the door.

Holy fuck, what does he have in mind? I blink up at him as he turns on me.

"Why haven't you emailed me? Or texted me back?" He's glaring down at me.

I'm nonplussed. "I haven't looked at my computer today, or my phone." Crap, has he been trying to phone? I try my distraction technique that's so effective on Rose. "That was a great speech."

"Thank you."

"Explains your food issues to me."

He runs a hand through his hair, exasperated. “Isabella, I don’t want to go there at the moment.” He closes his eyes looking pained. “I’ve been worried about you.”

“Worried, why?”

“Because you went home in that deathtrap you call transport.”

“What? It’s not a deathtrap. It’s fine. Jake regularly services it for me.”

“Jake… the photographer?” Edward’s eyes narrow, his face frosting. Oh crap.

“Yes, the truck used to belong to his father.”

“Yes and probably his father’s father, and his father before him. It’s not safe.”

“I’ve been driving it for years. I’m sorry you were worried. Why didn’t you call?” Jeez, he’s completely over-reacting.

He takes a deep breath. “Isabella, I need an answer from you. This waiting around is driving me crazy.”

“Edward, I… look I’ve left my father…”

“Tomorrow. I want an answer by tomorrow.”

“Okay, tomorrow. I’ll tell you then.” I blink at him.

He steps back and regards me coolly… and his shoulders relax.

“Are you staying for drinks?”

“I don’t know what my dad wants to do.”

“Your dad? I’d like to meet him.”

Oh no… why? “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

Edward unlocks the door, his mouth in a grim line. “Are you ashamed of me?”

“No…” It’s my turn to sound exasperated. “Introduce you to my father as what? ‘This is the man who deflowered me and wants us to start a BDSM relationship? I do hope you’ve left your gun at home.’”

Edward glares down at me, and then his lips twitch up in a smile.

“He carries a gun?”

“Yes.” And now, in spite of the fact I’m mad at him, my face is unwillingly pulled into an answering grin.

“I like living dangerously. Just tell him I’m your friend, Isabella.”

He opens the door and I head out. My mind is whirling. The Chancellor, the three Vice Chancellors, four professors and Rose stare at me as I walk hastily past them. Holy crap. I’d better go and find Charlie.

Chapter 29

Tell him I'm your friend. Friend with benefits, my subconscious scowls. I know, I know. I shake the unpleasant thought away. How will I introduce him to my dad? The hall is still at least half full and Charlie has not moved from his spot. He sees me, waves, and makes his way down.

"Hey Bells. Congratulations." He puts his arm around me.

"Would you like to come and have a drink in the marquee?"

"Sure… it's your day. Lead the way."

"We don't have to if you don't want to." *Please say no.*

"Bells, I've just sat for two and half hours listening to all kinds of jabbering. I need a drink."

I put my arm through his and we stroll out with the throng into the warmth of the early afternoon. We pass the line for the official photographer.

"Oh that reminds me…" Charlie drags a digital camera out of his pocket. "One for the album, Bella." I roll my eyes at him as he snaps a picture of me.

"Can I take the cap and gown off now? I feel kind of dorky."

You look kinda dorky. My subconscious is at her snarky best. *So, are you going to introduce your dad to the man you're fucking?* She is glaring at me over her wing-shaped spectacles. *He'd be so proud*. God I hate her sometimes.

The marquee is immense, and crowded – students, parents, teachers and friends, all chattering happily. Charlie hands me a glass of champagne, or cheap fizzy wine, I suspect. It's not chilled and it tastes sweet. My thoughts turn to Edward.*He won't like this.*

"Bella!" I turn, and Jasper Hale scoops me into his arms. He twirls me around, without spilling my wine, some feat. "Congratulations!" He beams down at me, hazel eyes twinkling. What a surprise. His dirty-blond hair tousled and sexy-looking. He's as beautiful as Rose. The family resemblance is striking.

"Wow – Jasper! How lovely to see you. Dad, this is Jasper, Rose's twin brother – Jasper, this is my father Charlie Swan." They shake hands, my father coolly assessing Mr. Hale.

“Did you graduate yesterday?” I ask.

“Yes, Pullman went first. The folks and I didn’t tell my bossy sister, just to surprise her,” he says conspiratorially.

“That’s so sweet.” I grin up at him.

“Well she is Valedictorian. Couldn’t miss that.” He looks immensely proud of his sister.

“She gave a great speech.”

“That she did,” Charlie agrees.

Jasper has his arm around my waist when I look up into the frosty green eyes of Edward Cullen. Rose is beside him.

“Hello, Charlie.” Rose kisses Charlie on both cheeks, making him flush. “Have you met Bella’s boyfriend? Edward Cullen.”

Holy shit, Rose… Fuck! And all the blood drains from my face.

“Mr. Swan, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” Edward says smoothly, warmly, completely unflustered by Rose’s introduction. He holds out his hand, which, all credit to Charlie, Charlie takes, not showing a hint of the drop-dead surprise he’s just had thrust upon him. *Thank you very much, Rosalie Hale,* I fume. I think my subconscious has swooned and fainted.

“Mr. Cullen,” Charlie murmurs, his expression completely indecipherable, except perhaps for the slight widening of his big, brown eyes. They are the exact same shade as mine, and they slide over to me with a … when-were-going-to-give-me-this-news look. I bite my lip.

“And this is my brother, Jasper Hale,” says Rose to Edward.

Edward turns his arctic glare on Jasper, who still has one arm around me.

“Mr. Hale.”

They shake hands. Edward holds his hand out to me.

“Bella, darling,” he murmurs and I nearly expire at the endearment.

I walk out of Jasper’s grasp while Edward smiles icily at him, and I take my place at his side, completely immobilized. Rose grins at me. She knows exactly what she’s doing… vixen!

“Jasper, Mom and Dad wanted a word.” Rose drags Jasper away.

“So how long have you kids known each other?” Charlie looks impassively from Edward to me. I am lost for words. The power of speech has deserted me. I want the ground to swallow me up. Edward puts his arm around me, his thumb skimming my naked back in a caress before his hand clasps my shoulder.

“Couple of weeks or so now,” he says smoothly. “We met when Bella came to interview me for the student magazine.”

“Didn’t know you worked on the student magazine, Bells.”

“Rose was ill,” I murmur. It’s all I can manage.

“Fine speech you gave, Mr. Cullen.”

“Thank you, Sir. I understand that you’re a keen fisherman…”

Charlie raises his eyebrows and smiles – a rare, genuine, bona fide Charlie Swan smile – and off they go, talking fish. In fact, I soon feel surplus to requirements. He’s charming the pants off my dad. *Like he did you,* my subconscious snaps at me. His power knows no bounds. I excuse myself to go and find Rose.

She’s talking to her parents, who are delightful as ever, and greet me warmly. We exchange brief pleasantries, mostly about their up and coming holiday to Barbados and about our move.

“Rose, how could you out me to Charlie?” I hiss, at the first opportunity we won’t be overheard.

“Because I knew you never would, and I want to help with Edward’s commitment issues.” Rose smiles at me sweetly.

I frown at her. *It’s me that won’t commit to him, silly!*

“He seems tres cool about it Bella, don’t sweat it. Look at him now – Edward can not take his eyes off you.” I glance up and both Charlie and Edward are looking at me. “He’s been watching you like a hawk.”

“I’d better go rescue Charlie or Edward, I don’t know which. You haven’t heard the last of this, Rosalie Hale!” I scowl at her.

“Bella! I did you a favor,” she calls after me.

“Hi.” I smile at both of them on my return. They seem okay. Edward is enjoying some private joke and my dad looks unbelievably relaxed, given he’s in a social situation. *What have they been discussing, apart from fish?*

“Bells, where are the restrooms?”

“Back out front and to the left Dad.”

“See you in a moment. You kids enjoy yourselves.”

Charlie heads out. I glance nervously up at Edward. We pause briefly as a photographer takes a picture of both of us.

"Thank you, Mr. Cullen." The photographer scurries off. I blink from the flash.

“So you’ve charmed my father as well.”

“As well?” His green eyes burn and he raises an eyebrow at me.

I flush. He lifts his hand and traces my cheek with his fingers.

“Oh, I wish I knew what you were thinking Isabella,” he whispers darkly, cupping my chin and raising my head so that we gaze intently into each other’s eyes. My breath hitches. How can he have this effect on me, even in this crowded tent?

“Right now, I’m thinking… nice tie,” I breathe.

He chuckles. “It’s recently become my favorite.”

I think I blush scarlet.

“You look lovely, Isabella. This halter-neck dress suits you, and I get to stroke your back, feel your beautiful skin.”

And suddenly it’s like we’re on our own in the room. Just me and him, my whole body has come alive, every nerve ending singing softly, that electricity pulling me to him, charging between us.

“You know it’s going to be good, don’t you baby?” he whispers.

I close my eyes as inside my body uncoils and melts.

“But I want more,” I whisper.

“More?” he looks down at me puzzled, his eyes green fire.

I nod and swallow. *Now he knows*.

“More,” he says again softly. Testing the word. A small, simple word, but so full of promise. His thumb traces my lower lip. “You want hearts and flowers.”

I nod again. He blinks down at me, and I can see his internal struggle, played out in his eyes.

“Isabella.” His voice is soft. “It’s not something I know.”

“Me neither...”

He smiles slightly. “You don’t know much.”

“You know all the wrong things.”

“Wrong? Not to me.” He shakes his head slightly. He looks so sincere. “Try it,” he whispers… A challenge, daring me, and he cocks his head to one side and smiles his crooked, dazzling smile.

I gasp, and I’m Eve in the Garden of Eden, and he’s the serpent, and I cannot resist.

“Okay,” I whisper.

“What?” I have his full, undivided attention.

I swallow. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“You’re agreeing?” His disbelief is evident.

“Subject to the soft limits, yes, I’ll try.” My voice is so small.

Edward closes his eyes and pulls me into an embrace. “Jesus, Bella, you’re so unexpected. You take my breath away.”

He steps back and suddenly Charlie’s returned, and the volume in the marquee gradually rises and fills my ears. We are not alone. *Holy shit, I’ve just agreed to be his sub*. Edward smiles politely at Charlie, but his eyes are dancing with joy.

“Bells, shall we get some lunch?”

"Okay." I blink up at Charlie, trying to find my equilibrium. *What have you done?* My subconscious screams at me. My inner goddess is doing back flips in a routine worthy of a Russian Olympic gymnast.

"Would you like to join us, Edward?" Charlie asks.

Edward! I stare up at him, imploring him to refuse. I need space to think. What the fuck have I done?

"Thank you, Mr. Swan, but I have plans. It's been a great to meet you, sir."

"Likewise," Charlie responds. "Look after my baby girl."

"Oh, I fully intend to, Mr. Swan."

They shake hands. I feel slightly sick. Charlie has no idea how Edward intends to look after me. Edward takes my hand and raises it to his lips and kisses my knuckles very softly, his scorching eyes intent on mine.

"Later, Miss Swan," he breathes, his voice full of promise. My insides curl at the thought… oh my. *Hang on… later?*

Charlie takes my elbow and leads me towards the entrance to the tent.

"Seems a solid young man. Well-off, too. You could do a lot worse Bells. Though why I had to hear about him from Rosalie…" he scolds.

I shrug apologetically.

"Well, any man who likes and knows his fishing is okay with me."

Holy crow – Charlie approves. If only he knew.

Charlie drops me back at the house at dusk.

"Call your mom," he says.

"I will. Thanks for coming, Dad."

"Wouldn't have missed it for the world, Bells. You make me so proud."

Oh no... I'm not going to get emotional. A huge lump forms in my throat and I hug him, hard. He puts his arms around me, bemused, and I can't help it – tears pool in my eyes.

"Hey, Bella, sweetheart," Charlie croons. "Big old day, eh? Want me to come in and make you some tea?"

I laugh, in spite of my tears. Tea is always the answer according to Charlie. I remember my mother complaining about Charlie, saying that when it came to tea and sympathy he was always good at the tea, not so hot on the sympathy.

"No Dad, I'm good. It's been so great to see you. I'll visit real soon, once I'm settled in Seattle."

"Well, good luck with the interviews. Let me know how they go."

"Sure thing, Dad."

"Love you, Bells."

"Love you too, Charlie."

He smiles at me, his brown eyes warm, glowing, and he climbs back into his truck. I wave him off as he drives into the dusk and I wander listlessly back into the apartment.

First thing I do is check my cell phone. It needs recharging so I have to hunt down the charger and plug it in before I can collect my messages. Four missed calls, one voice message, and two texts.

Three missed calls from Edward… no messages. One missed call from Jake, and a voice mail from him wishing me all the best for graduation.

I open the texts.

Are you home safe

Call me

They are both from Edward, why didn't he call the landline?

I head into my bedroom and fire up the mean machine.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tonight
Date: 27 May 2009 23:58
To: Isabella Swan

I hope you made it home in that truck of yours.
Let me know if you're okay.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

Jeez... why is he so worried about my truck? My truck has given me five years of loyal service, and Jake has always been on hand to maintain it for me.

Edward's next email is from today.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Soft Limits
Date: 28 May 2009 17.22
To: Isabella Swan

What can I say that I haven't already?
Happy to talk these through anytime.
You looked beautiful today.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I want to see him. I hit reply

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Soft Limits
Date: 28 May 2009 19.23
To: Edward Cullen

I can come over this evening to discuss if you'd like…
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Soft Limits
Date: 28 May 2009 19.27
To: Isabella Swan

I'll come over to you. I meant it when I said I wasn't happy about you driving that truck. I'll be with you shortly.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

Holy crap, he's coming over now. I have to get one thing ready for him, the first edition Thomas Hardy books are still on the shelves in the living room. I cannot keep them. I wrap them in brown paper and I scrawl on the wrapping, a direct quote from Tess, from the book:

I agree to the conditions, Angel; because you know best what my punishment ought to be; only - only - don't make it more than I can bear!"

Chapter 30

"Hi," I say shyly when I open the door.

Edward is standing on the porch in his jeans and leather jacket.

"Hi," he says and smiles radiantly. And I take a moment to admire the pretty. Holy Moses, he's hot in leather.

"Come in."

"If I may," he says, amused. He holds up a bottle of champagne as he walks in. "I thought we'd celebrate your graduation. Nothing beats a good Bollinger."

"Interesting choice of words," I comment dryly.

He grins at me. "Oh, I like your ready wit Isabella."

"We only have teacups. We've packed all the glasses."

"Teacups? Sounds good to me."

I head into the kitchen. Nervous, butterflies flooding my stomach, it's like having a panther or mountain lion all unpredictable and predatory in my living room.

"Do you want saucers as well?"

"Teacups will be fine, Isabella," Edward calls distractedly from the living room.

When I come back he's staring down at the brown parcel of books. I place the cups on the table.

"That's for you," I murmur anxiously. *Crap. This is probably going to be a fight.*

"Hmmm, I figured as much. Very apt quote." His long index finger absently traces the writing. "I thought I was D'Urberville, not Angel. You decided on the debasement," he smiles a brief wolfish grin at me. "Trust you to find something that resonates so appropriately."

"It's also a plea," I whisper. *Why am I so nervous?* My mouth is dry.

"A plea? For me to go easy on you?"

I nod.

"I bought these for you," he says quietly gazing at me impassively. "I'll go easier on you if you accept them."

I swallow convulsively. "Edward, I can't accept them… They're just too much."

"You see, this is what I was talking about, you defying me. I want you to have them and that's the end of the discussion. It's very simple. You don't have to think about this. As a submissive, you would just be grateful for them. You just accept what I buy you because it pleases me for you to do so."

"I wasn't a submissive when you bought them for me," I whisper.

"No, but you've agreed, Isabella." His eyes turn wary.

I sigh. I am not going to win this, so over to plan B.

"So they are mine to do with as I wish?"

He eyes me suspiciously, but concedes. "As you wish."

"Well in that case I'd like to give them to a charity, one working in Darfur, since that seems to be close to your heart. They can auction them."

"If that's what you want to do." His mouth sets into a hard line. He's disappointed.

I flush. "I'll think about it," I murmur, I don't want to disappoint him, and his words come back to me. *I want you to want to please me.*

"Don't think, Isabella. Not about this." His tone is quiet and serious.

How can I not think? *You can pretend to be a car, like his other possessions,* my subconscious makes an unwelcome vitriolic return. I ignore her. Oh, can't we rewind? The atmosphere between us now is tense. I don't know what to do. I stare down at my fingers. How do I retrieve this situation?

He puts the champagne bottle on the table and comes and stands in front of me. Putting his hand under my chin, he pulls my head up. He gazes down at me, his expression grave.

"I will buy you lots of things, Isabella. Get used to it. I can afford it. I'm a very wealthy man." He leans down and plants a swift, chaste kiss on my lips. "Please." He releases me.

'*Ho'* my subconscious mouths unpleasantly at me.

“It makes me feel cheap,” I murmur.

Edward runs his hand through his hair, exasperated.

“It shouldn’t do… you’re over-thinking it Isabella. Putting some vague moral judgment on yourself, based on… what? Don’t waste your energy. It’s only because you have reservations about our arrangement. That’s perfectly natural. You don’t really know what you’re getting yourself into.”

I frown, trying to process his words.

“Hey, stop this,” he commands, softly cupping my chin again and pulling at it gently so I release my lower lip from my teeth. “There is nothing about you that is cheap, Isabella. I won’t have you thinking that. I just bought you some old books, that’s all. Have some champagne.” His eyes warm and soften and I smile tentatively back up at him.

“That’s better,” he murmurs.

He picks up the champagne, takes off the foil top and cage, twists the bottle rather than the cork, and opens it with a small pop and a practiced flourish that doesn’t spill a drop. He half-fills the cups.

“It’s pink,” I murmur, surprised.

“Bollinger Grande Année Rosé 1999, an excellent vintage,” he says with relish.

“In teacups.”

He grins. “In teacups. Congratulations on your degree Isabella.” We clink cups and he takes a drink but I can’t help thinking this is really about my… capitulation.

“Thank you,” I murmur and take a sip. Of course it’s delicious. “Shall we go through the soft limits?” I blush.

He smiles at me. “Always so eager.” Edward takes my hand and leads me to the couch where he sits and pulls me down beside him.

“Your father’s a very taciturn man.”

Oh… not soft limits, then. I just want to get this out of the way, the anxiety is gnawing at me.

“You managed to have him eating out of your hand.” I pout.

Edward laughs softly. “Only because I know how to fish.”

“How do you know he liked fishing?”

“You told me. When we went for coffee.”

“Oh… did I?” I take another sip. Wow he has a memory for detail. Hmmm… this champagne really is very good. “Did you try the wine at the reception?”

Edward makes a face. “Yes. It was foul.”

“I thought of you when I tasted it. How did you get to be so knowledgeable about wine?”

“I’m not knowledgeable Isabella, I just know what I like.” His green eyes shine at me, and it makes me flush. “Some more?” he asks, referring to the champagne.

“Please.”

Edward rises gracefully and collects the bottle. He fills my cup. Is he getting me tipsy? I eye him suspiciously.

“This place looks pretty bare. Are you ready for the move?”

“More or less.”

“Are you working tomorrow?”

“Yes, my last day at Newton’s.”

“I’d help you move, but I promised to meet my sister at the airport.”

Oh… this is news.

“Alice arrives from Paris very early Saturday morning. I’m heading back to Seattle tomorrow, but I hear Emmett is giving you two a hand.”

“Yes, Rose is very excited about that.”

Edward frowns. “Yes, Rose and Emmett… who would have thought?” he murmurs, and for some reason he doesn’t look pleased.

“So what are you doing about work in Seattle?”

When are we going to talk about the limits? What’s his game?

"I have a couple of interviews for intern places."

"Oh… and you were going tell me this when?"

"Err… I'm telling you now."

He narrows his eyes. "Where?"

For some reason, possibly because he might use his influence, I just don't want to tell him.

"A couple of publishing houses."

"Is that what you want to do, something in publishing?"

I nod warily.

"Well?" He looks at me patiently wanting more information.

"Well what?"

"Don't be obtuse Isabella, which publishing houses?" he scolds.

"Just small ones," I murmur.

"Why don't you want me to know?"

"Undue influence."

He looks at me quizzically.

"Oh, now *you're* being obtuse."

He laughs. "Obtuse? Me? God you're challenging. Drink up, let's talk about these limits." He fishes out another copy of my email and the discussion list. Does he wander about with these lists in his pockets? I think there's one in his jacket that I have. Holy crow. I drain my cup.

He glances quickly at me. "More?"

"Please."

He smiles that oh-so-smug-private smile of his, holds the champagne bottle up and pauses.

"Have you eaten anything?"

Oh no, not this old chestnut. “Yes, I had a three course meal with Charlie.” I roll my eyes at him. The champagne is making me bold.

He leans forward and holds my chin, staring intently into my eyes.

“Next time you roll your eyes at me, I will take you across my knee.”

What?!

“Oh,” I breathe and I can see the excitement in his eyes.

“Oh,” he responds, mirroring my tone. “So it begins, Isabella…”

My heart slams against my chest and the butterflies escape from my stomach into my constricting throat. *Why is that hot?*

He fills my cup and I drink… practically all of it. Chastened, I stare up at him.

“Got your attention now, haven’t I?”

I nod.

“Answer me.”

“Yes, you’ve got my attention.”

“Good,” he smiles a knowing smile. “So, sexual acts, we’ve done most of this.”

I move closer to him on the couch and glance down at the list.

Masturbation

Fellatio

Cunnilingus

Vaginal intercourse

Vaginal fisting

Anal intercourse

Anal fisting

"No fisting, you say. Anything else you object to?" he asks softly.

I swallow. "Well, anal intercourse doesn't exactly float my boat."

"I'll agree to the fisting, but I'd really like to claim your ass, Isabella. But we'll wait for that. Besides, it's not something we can dive into," he smirks at me. "Your ass will need training."

"Training?" I whisper.

"Oh yes. It'll need careful preparation. Anal intercourse can be very pleasurable, trust me. But if we try it and you don't like it, we don't have to do it again." He grins down at me. I blink up at him.

He thinks I'll enjoy it? How does he know it's pleasurable?

"Have you done that?" I whisper.

"Yes." Holy crap.

I gasp. "With a man?"

"No. I've never had sex with a man. Not my scene."

"Mrs. Robinson?"

"Yes."

Holy shit… how? I frown. He moves on down the list.

"Okay, swallowing semen. Well you get an A in that."

I flush and my inner goddess smacks her lips together glowing with pride.

"So…" He looks down at me grinning. "Swallowing semen okay?"

I nod, not able to look him in the eye and drain my cup again.

"More?" he asks softly.

"More." And I'm suddenly reminded of our conversation earlier today as he refills my cup. Is he referring to that or just the champagne? Is this whole champagne thing more?

"Sex toys?" he asks.

I shrug, glancing down the list.

Vibrators

Dildos

Butt Plugs

Other

"Butt plug… does it do what it says on the package?" I scrunch my nose up in distaste.

"Yes." He smiles. "And I refer to anal intercourse above. Training."

"Oh… what's in other?"

"Beads, eggs, that sort of stuff."

"Eggs?" I'm alarmed.

"Not real eggs," he laughs loudly, shaking his head.

I purse my lips at him. "I'm glad you find me funny." I can't keep my injured feelings out of my voice.

He stops laughing. "I apologize. Miss Swan, I'm sorry," he says, trying to look contrite, but his eyes are still dancing with humor. "Any problem with toys?"

"No," I snap.

"Isabella," he cajoles. "I am sorry. Believe me. I don't mean to laugh. I've never had this conversation in so much detail. You're just so inexperienced. I'm sorry." His eyes are big and green and sincere.

I thaw a little and take another sip of champagne.

"Right – bondage," he says returning to the list. I examine the list and my inner goddess bounces up and down like a small child waiting for ice cream.

Hands in front

Hands behind back

Ankles

Knees

Elbows

Wrists to ankles

Spreader bars

Tied to furniture

Use of blindfold

Use of gag

Use of rope

Use of tape

Use of handcuffs/metal restraints

Use of leather cuffs

Suspension

“We’ve talked about suspension. And it’s fine if you want to set that up as a hard limit. It takes a great deal of time and I only have you for short periods of time anyway… anything else?”

“Don’t laugh at me, but what’s a spreader bar?”

“I promise not to laugh. I’ve apologized twice." He glares at me. "Don’t make me do it again,” he warns. And I think I visibly shrink. Oh, he's so bossy. “A spreader is a bar with cuffs, for ankles and wrists. They’re fun.”

“Okay, well, gagging me. I’d be worried I wouldn’t be able to breathe”

“*I’d* be worried if you couldn’t breathe. I don’t want to suffocate you.”

“And how will I use safe words if I’m gagged?”

He pauses.

“Well, first of all, I hope you never have to use them. But if you’re gagged, we’ll use hand signals,” he says simply.

I blink up at him. But if I'm trussed up, how's that going to work? My brain is beginning to fog. *Hmmm alcohol.*

"I'm nervous about the gagging."

"Okay… I'll take note."

I stare up at him, realization dawning.

"Do you like tying your submissives up so they can't touch you?"

He gazes down at me, speculatively.

"That's one of the reasons," he says quietly.

"Is that why you've tied my hands?"

"Yes." His gaze gives nothing away.

"You don't like talking about that," I murmur.

"No, I don't. Would you like another drink? It's making you brave and I need to know how you feel about pain."

Holy crap. This is the tricky part. He refills my teacup and I sip.

"So, what's your general attitude to receiving pain?" Edward looks down at me. "Hmmm, you're biting your lip," he says darkly.

I stop immediately, but I don't know what to say. I flush and stare down at my hands.

"Were you physically punished as a child?"

"No."

"So you have no sphere of reference at all?"

"No."

"It's not as bad as you think. Your imagination is your worst enemy in this," he whispers.

"Do you have to do it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Goes with the territory, Isabella. It's what I do. I can see you're nervous. Let's go through methods." He shows me the list. My subconscious runs, screaming and hides behind the couch.

Spanking

Paddling

Whipping

Caning

Biting

Nipple clamps

Genital clamps

Ice

Hot wax

Tickling

Other types/methods of pain

"Well, you said no to genital clamps. That's fine. It's caning that hurts the most."

I blanch.

"We can work up to that."

"Or not do it at all," I whisper.

"This is part of the deal, baby, but we'll work up to all of this. Isabella, I won't push you too far."

"This punishment thing, it worries me the most." My voice is very small.

"Well, I'm glad you've told me. We'll keep caning off the list for now. And as you get more comfortable with this stuff we'll increase intensity. We'll take it slow."

I swallow and he leans forward and kisses me on my lips.

"There, that wasn't so bad was it?"

I shrug, my heart in mouth again.

"Look, I want to talk about one more thing and then I'm taking you to bed."

"Bed?" I blink rapidly and my blood pounds around my body, warming all those places.

"Oh come on, Isabella…talking through all this stuff… I want to fuck you into next week, right now. It must be having some effect on you too."

I squirm. My inner goddess is panting.

"See? Beside, there's something I want to try."

"Something painful?"

"No – stop seeing pain everywhere. It's mainly overwhelming pleasure. Have I hurt you yet?"

I flush. "No."

"Well then. Look, earlier today you were talking about… wanting more," he halts, uncertain all of a sudden.

Oh…my. Where's this going?

He clasps my hand. "Outside of the time you're my sub, perhaps we could try. I don't know if it will work. I don't know about separating everything. It may not work. But I'm willing to try. Maybe one night a week… I don't know."

Holy crow. My mouth drops open, my subconscious is in shock, *Edward Cullen is up for more!*

Chapter 31

He's willing to try! My subconscious peeks out from behind the couch, still registering shock on her harpy face.

"I have one condition." He looks down at my stunned expression.

"What?" I breathe. Anything, I'll give you anything.

"You graciously accept my graduation present to you."

"Oh…" And deep down I know what it is. Dread spawns in my belly.

He's staring down at me, gauging my reaction. " Come," he murmurs and rises, dragging me up. Taking his jacket off, he drapes it over my shoulders and heads for the door.

Parked outside is a small silver Volvo.

"It's for you. Happy graduation," he murmurs, and pulls me to him and kisses my hair.

He's bought me a bloody car, brand new by the looks of it. Jeez. I've had enough trouble with the books. I stare at it blankly, trying desperately to determine how I feel about this. I am appalled on one level, grateful on another, shocked that he's actually done it, but the overriding emotion is… anger. Yes, I'm angry, especially after everything I told him about the books… but then he'd already bought this.

"Isabella, that truck of yours is old and frankly dangerous. I would never forgive myself if something happened to you. When it's so easy for me to make it right…" he trails off. I can feel his eyes on me, but at the moment I cannot bring myself to look at him. I stand there staring at its awesome silver newness, silently.

"I mentioned it to your Dad. He was all for it," he murmurs.

I turn and stare at him, my mouth open in horror.

"You mentioned this to Charlie. How could you?" I can barely get the words out. How dare he? Poor Charlie. I feel sick, mortified for my father.

"It's a gift, Isabella. Can't you just say thank you?"

"But you know it's too much." Even to my own ears I sound whiny.

"Not to me it isn't, not for my peace of mind."

I frown at him, at a loss what to say. He just doesn't get it. He's had money all his life… Well, actually, not all his life – not as a small child – and my world-view shifts slightly. The thought is very sobering, and I soften towards the car, feeling slightly guilty about my fit of pique. His intentions are good, misguided, but not from a bad place.

"I'm happy for you to loan this to me… like the laptop."

"Okay, on loan… indefinitely." He looks warily at me.

"No, not indefinitely, but for now. Thank you."

He frowns down at me. I reach up and kiss him briefly on his cheek.

"Thank you for the car, sir." I say, as sweetly as I can manage.

He grabs me suddenly and pulls me up against him, one hand at my back holding me to him and the other fisting in my hair.

"You are one challenging woman, Bella Swan." He kisses me passionately, forcing my lips apart with his tongue, taking no prisoners. My blood heats immediately and I'm returning his kiss. I want him badly, in spite of the car, the books, the soft limits, the caning… I want him.

"It's taking all my self control not to fuck you on the hood of this car right now, just to show you that you are mine, and if I want to buy you a fucking car, I'll buy you a fucking car," he growls. "Now let's get you inside and naked." He plants a swift rough kiss on me, and I can tell he's angry. He grabs my hand and leads me back into the apartment and straight into my bedroom, no passing go. My subconscious is behind the sofa again, head hidden under her hands. He switches on the sidelight and stands staring at me.

"Please don't be angry with me," I whisper.

His gaze is impassive, green eyes cold shards of glass.

"I'm sorry about the car, and the books…" I trail off.

I get nothing.

"You scare me when you're angry," I breathe, staring at him.

He blinks and he closes his eyes and shakes his head. When he opens them, his eyes have softened fractionally. He takes a deep breath and swallows.

“Turn around,” he whispers. “I want to get you out of that dress.”

Another mercurial mood swing. How can I keep up? I turn obediently and my heart is thumping, desire instantly replacing fear, coursing through my blood and settling dark and yearning, low, low in my belly. He scoops my hair off my back so it hangs down the right side of my face, curling at my breast.

He places his index finger at the nape of my neck and achingly slowly drags it down my spine. I can feel his well-manicured fingernail gently grazing down my back.

“I like this dress,” he murmurs. “I like to see your flawless skin.”

His finger reaches the back of my halter dress midway down my spine and, hooking his finger beneath the top, he pulls me closer so that I step back towards him. I can feel him flush against my body. He leans down and inhales my hair.

“You smell so good, Isabella. So sweet.” His nose skims past my ear down my neck and he trails soft, feather light kisses along my shoulder. My breathing has changed… shallow, rushed… full of expectation. I can feel his fingers at my zipper. Very slowly, he pulls it down while his lips move, licking, and kissing and sucking their way across to my other shoulder. He is so tantalizingly good at this. My body resonates and I start to squirm languidly beneath his touch.

“You. Are. Going. To. Have. To. Learn. To. Keep. Still,” he whispers, kissing me around my nape between each word. He tugs at the fastening at the halter neck and the dress pools at my feet.

“No bra, Miss Swan. I like that.”

His hands reach round and cup my breasts, and my nipples pucker at his touch.

“Lift your arms and put them around my head,” he murmurs against my neck.

I obey immediately and my breasts rise and pull in his hands, my nipples hardening further. My fingers weave into his hair and very gently, I pull his soft sexy hair. I roll my head to one side to give him easier access to my neck.

“Mmm,” he murmurs, into that space behind my ear, as he starts to extend my nipples with his long fingers, mirroring my hands in his hair. I groan as the sensation registers sharp and clear in my groin.

“Shall I make you come this way?” he whispers.

I arch my back to force my breasts into his expert hands.

"You like this don't you, Miss Swan?"

"Mmmm…"

"Tell me." He continues the slow sensuous torture, pulling gently.

"Yes…"

"Yes, what."

"Yes, sir."

"Good girl." He pinches me hard and my body writhes convulsively against his front, and I gasp at the exquisite, acute, pleasure/pain. I can feel him. I moan and my hands clench in his hair pulling harder.

"I don't think you're ready to come yet," he whispers, stilling his hands and he gently bites my earlobe and tugs at it. "Besides, you have displeased me."

Oh no, what will this mean? My brain registers through the fog of needy desire as I groan.

"So perhaps I won't let you come after all…"

He returns the attention of his fingers to my nipples, pulling, twisting, kneading.

I grind my behind against him, moving side to side.

I can feel his grin against my neck as his hands move down to my hips and his fingers hook into my panties at the back, stretching them and he pushes his thumbs through the material, shredding them and tossing them in front of me so I can see. Holy shit. His hands move down to my sex, and from behind he slowly inserts his finger.

"Oh, yes… my sweet girl is all ready," he breaths and he whirls me around so I'm facing him. His breathing has quickened. He puts his finger in his mouth.

"You taste so fine, Miss Swan," he sighs. "Undress me," he commands quietly staring down at me, eyes hooded. All I'm wearing is my shoes. Well, Rose's high-heeled pumps.

I'm taken aback. I've never undressed a man.

"You can do it," he cajoles softly.

Oh… my… I blink rapidly. Where to start. I reach for his t-shirt, and he grabs my hands and shakes his head, smiling slyly at me.

"Oh no…" He shakes his head at me, grinning. "Not the t-shirt. You may need to touch me, for what I have planned." And his eyes are alive with excitement. *Oh…this is news. I can touch with clothes.*

He takes one of my hands and places it against his erection.

"This is the effect you have on me, Miss Swan."

I gasp, and flex my fingers around his girth, and he grins.

"I want to be inside you. Take my jeans off, you're in charge."

Holy fuck. Me in charge. I think my mouth drops open slightly.

"What are you going to do with me?" he teases.

Oh the possibilities. My inner goddess roars, and from somewhere born of frustration, need, and sheer Swan bravery, I push him on to the bed, and he laughs as he falls.

I gaze down at him, feeling victorious. My inner goddess is going to explode. I pull off his shoes, quickly, clumsily and his socks. He's staring up at me, his eyes luminous with amusement and desire, he looks… glorious. *Mine.*

I crawl up the bed and sit astride him to undo his jeans, sliding my fingers under the waistband, feeling the hair in his oh so happy trail. He closes his eyes and I feel his hips flex.

"You'll have to learn to keep still," I scold, and tug at the hair under his waistband.

His breath hitches and he grins at me.

"Yes, Miss Swan," he murmurs, eyes burning bright. "In my pocket… Condom," he breathes.

I search in his pocket, slowly, watching his face as I feel around. His mouth is open. I fish out both foil packets that I find and lay them on the bed by his hips. *Two!* My over-eager fingers reach for the button of his waistband and undo it, fumbling a little. I am beyond excited.

"So eager, Miss Swan," he murmurs, and I can hear the humor in his voice. I pull down the zipper, and now I'm faced with the problem of removing his pants… *hmmm.* I shuffle down and pull. They hardly move. I frown. How can this be so difficult?

"I can't keep still if you're going to bite that lip," he warns and he arches his pelvis up off the bed so I'm able to yank down his trousers and his boxers at the same time, whoa, freeing him. He kicks his clothes to the floor. Oh… my. He's all mine to play with, and suddenly it's Christmas.

"Now what are you going to do?" he breathes, all traces of humor gone. I reach up and touch him, watching his expression as I do. His mouth shapes like a letter O as he takes a sharp breath. His skin is so smooth and soft… and hard… Hmmm, what a delicious combination. I lean forward, my hair falling around me and he's in my mouth. I suck… hard. He closes his eyes, his hips jerking beneath me.

"Jeez Bella, steady," he groans.

God I feel so powerful, it's such a heady feeling, teasing and testing him with my mouth and tongue. I can feel him tensing underneath me as I run my mouth up and down him, pushing him to the back of my throat, my lips tight, again and again.

"Stop, Bella… Dtop. I don't want to come."

I sit up, blinking at him, and I'm panting… like him, but confused. *I thought I was in charge?* My inner goddess looks like someone snatched her ice cream.

"You're innocence and enthusiasm… is very disarming," he gasps. "You, on top, that's what we need to do."

Oh…

"Here, put this on." He hands me a foil packet.

Holy crow… How? I rip the packet open and the rubbery condom is all tacky in my fingers.

"Pinch the top and then roll it down. You don't want any air in the end of that sucker," he pants. And very slowly, concentrating hard, I do as I'm told.

He groans, "Jesus, you're killing me here Isabella."

I admire my handiwork, and him. He really is a fine specimen of a man. Looking at him is very, very arousing.

"Now, I want to be buried inside you," he says.

I stare down at him, daunted, and he sits up suddenly, so we're nose to nose.

"Like this," he breathes and he snakes one hand round my hips, lifting me slightly, and with the other he positions himself beneath me, and very slowly, eases me on to him.

I groan as he stretches me open, filling me. My mouth hanging open in surprise at the sweet, sublime, agonizing, over-full feeling. *Oh, please*.

"That's right baby, feel me. All of me," he growls and briefly closes his eyes.

And he's inside me, sheathed to the hilt and he holds me in place, for seconds… minutes… I have no idea, staring intently into my eyes.

"It's deep this way," he murmurs.

And he flexes and swivels his hips in the same motion and I groan. Oh my - the sensation radiates throughout my belly… everywhere. *Fuck!*

"Again," I whisper.

He grins a lazy grin, and obliges. I moan, throwing my head back, my hair tumbling down my back, and very slowly he sinks back down on to the bed.

"You move Isabella, up and down, how you want. Take my hands."

I clasp them, holding on for life and very gently I push off him and back down, *oh fucking my*. His eyes are burning with wild anticipation, his breathing is ragged, matching mine and he lifts his pelvis as I come down, bouncing me back up. We pick up the rhythm, up, down, up, down, over and over, and it feels so… good. And between my panting breaths, the deep down, brimming fullness, the vehement sensation pulsing through me, that's building, quickly, I watch him, our eyes locked. I see wonder there, wonder at me. Oh my, I am fucking him. I am in charge. He's mine. I'm his. The thought pushes me, weighted with concrete, over the edge and I climax around him, shouting incoherently, and he grabs my hips and closing his eyes, he comes quietly. I collapse on to his chest, overwhelmed, somewhere between fantasy and reality… a place where there are no hard or soft limits.

Chapter 32

Slowly the outside world invades my senses, and oh my what an invasion. I am floating, limbs soft and languid, utterly spent and I'm lying on top of him, my head on his chest and he smells simply divine… fresh, laundered linen and some expensive body wash, and the best, most seductive scent on the planet: Edward. I don't want to move, I want to breathe this elixir for eternity. I nuzzle him, wishing I didn't have the barrier of his t-shirt. And as rhyme and reason return to the rest of my body, I stretch my hand out on his chest. This is the first time I've touched him here. He's firm, strong.

His hand swoops up and grabs mine, but he softens the blow my pulling it to his mouth and sweetly kissing my knuckles. He rolls over so he's gazing down at me.

"Don't," he murmurs and he kisses me lightly.

"Why don't you like to be touched?" I whisper staring up into soft green eyes.

"Because I'm fifty shades of fucked-up, Isabella."

Oh… His honesty is completely disarming. I blink up at him.

"I had a very tough introduction to life. I don't want to burden you with the details. Just… don't." He strokes his nose against mine and then he pulls out of me and sits up.

"I think that's all the very basics covered. How was that?" He looks thoroughly pleased with himself, and sounds very matter-of-fact at the same time. Like another tick box marked in a checklist, and I'm still reeling from the tough introduction to life comment. It's so frustrating – I am desperate to know more. But he won't tell me. I cock my head to one side, like he does, and make an enormous effort to smile at him.

"If you imagine for one minute that I think you ceded control to me, well you just haven't taken into account my GPA," I smile shyly at him. "But thank you for the illusion."

"Oh Miss Swan, you are not just a pretty face. You've had six orgasms so far… hmmm… and all of them belong to me," he boasts, playful again.

I flush and blink at the same time, as he stares down at me. His brow furrows.

"Do you have something to tell me?" his voice is suddenly stern.

I frown… Crap.

"I had a dream, this morning."

"Oh?" He glares at me.

Holy crow. Am I in trouble?

"I came in my sleep." I throw my arm over my eyes.

He says nothing. I peek up at him from under my arm and he looks amused.

"In your sleep?"

"Woke me up."

"I'm sure it did. What were you dreaming about?"

Crap…"You."

"What was I doing?"

I throw my arm over my eyes again. And like a small child, I briefly entertain the thought that if I can't see him, then he can't see me.

"Isabella, what was I doing? I won't ask you again."

"You had a riding crop."

He moves my arm. "Really?"

"Yes." I am crimson.

"There's hope for you yet," he murmurs. "I have several riding crops."

"Brown plaited leather?"

He laughs. "No, but I'm sure I could get one." His green eyes blaze with excitement. Leaning down, he kisses me briefly and then he stands and grabs his boxers. *Oh no… he's going.* I glance quickly at the time – it's only 9:40. I scoot out of bed too and grab my sweat pants and a cami top, and then sit back on the bed, cross-legged, watching him. I don't want him to go. What can I do?

"When is your period due?" He interrupts my thoughts.

What!?

“I hate wearing these things,” he grumbles. He holds up the condom, then puts it on the floor, and slips on his boxers and his jeans.

“Well?” he prompts when I don’t reply, and he looks at me expectantly, as if he’s waiting for my opinion on the weather. Holy crap… this is personal stuff.

“Next week.” I stare down at my hands.

“You need to sort out some contraception.”

He is so bossy. I stare at him blankly. He sits back on the bed as he puts on his shoes and socks.

“Do you have a doctor?”

I shake my head. We are back to mergers and acquisitions; another 180 degree mood swing.

He frowns. “I can have mine come and see you at your apartment – Sunday morning, before you come and see me. Or he can see you at my place. Which would you prefer?”

No pressure, then. Something else that he’s paying for, but actually this is for his benefit.

“Your place.” That means I am guaranteed to see him Sunday.

“Okay. I’ll let you know the time.”

“Are you leaving?”

Don’t go. Stay with me please.

“Yes.”

Why?

“How are you getting back?” I whisper.

“Taylor will pick me up.”

“I can drive you. I have a lovely new car.”

He gazes at me, his expression warm. “That’s more like it. But I think you’ve had too much to drink.”

I flush. “Did you get me tipsy on purpose?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because you over-think everything, and you’re reticent like your dad. A drop of wine in you and you start talking, and I need you to communicate honestly with me. Otherwise, you clam up and I have no idea what you’re thinking. In vino veritas, Isabella.”

“And you think you’re always honest with me?”

“I endeavor to be.” He looks down at me warily. “This will only work if we’re honest with each other.”

“I’d like you to stay… and use this.” I hold up the second condom.

He smiles softly, his eyes glow with humor.

“Isabella, I have crossed so many lines here tonight. I have to go. I’ll see you on Sunday. I’ll have the revised contract ready for you, and then we can really start to play.”

“Play?” *Holy shit.* My heart leaps into my mouth.

“I’d like to do a scene with you. But I won’t until you’ve signed, so I know you’re ready.”

“Oh… So I could stretch this out, if I don’t sign.”

He gazes at me assessing and then his lips twitch into a smile.

“Well I suppose you could, but I may crack under the strain.”

“Crack? How?” My inner goddess has woken and is paying attention.

He nods slowly and then he grins, teasing. “Could get really ugly…”

His grin is infectious.

“Ugly, how?”

“Oh you know, explosions, car chases, kidnapping, incarceration…”

“You’d kidnap me?”

"Oh yes." He grins.

"Hold me against my will?" *Jeez this is hot.*

"Oh yes," he nods. "And then we're talking TPE 24/7."

"You've lost me," I breathe, my heart is pounding. *Is he serious?*

"Total Power Exchange – around the clock." His eyes are shining and I can feel his excitement from where I sit. *Holy crow.*

"So you have no choice," he says sardonically.

"Clearly." I can't keep the sarcasm out of my voice as my eyes reach for the heavens.

"Oh… Isabella Swan, did you just roll your eyes at me?"

Holy crap. "No," I squeak.

"Oh, I think you did. What did I say I'd do to you if you rolled your eyes at me again?"

Shit. He sits down on the edge of the bed.

"Come here," he says softly.

I blanch. Jeez, he's serious. I sit staring at him, immobile.

"I haven't signed," I whisper.

"I told you what I'd do. I'm a man of my word. I'm going to spank you and then I'm going to fuck you very quick and very hard. Looks like we'll need that condom after all." His voice is so soft, menacing. *Shit, bloody hot*. My insides practically contort with potent, needy, liquid, desire.

He gazes at me, waiting, eyes blazing. Tentatively, I uncurl my legs. *Should I run?* This is it… our relationship hangs in the balance, right here, right now. Do I let him do this, or do I say no and then that's it? Because I know it will be over if I say no. *Do it!* My inner goddess pleads with me, my subconscious is as paralyzed as I am.

"I'm waiting," he says. "I'm not a patient man."

Oh for the love of all that's holy. I'm panting, afraid, turned on. Blood pounding through my body, my legs are like jelly. Slowly, I crawl over to him until I am beside him.

“Good girl,” he murmurs. “Now stand up.”

Oh shit, can’t he just get this over with? I’m not sure if I can stand. Hesitantly, I clamber to my feet. He holds his hand out and I place the condom in his hand. And suddenly he grabs me, tipping me across his lap. With one smooth movement, he angles his body so my torso is resting on the bed beside him. He throws his right leg over both of mine, and plants his left forearm on the small of my back, holding me down so I cannot move. *Oh fuck.*

“Put your hands up on either side of your head,” he orders.

I obey immediately.

“Why am I doing this Isabella?” he asks quietly.

“Because I rolled my eyes at you.” I can barely speak.

“Do you think that’s polite?”

“No.”

“Will you do it again?”

“No.”

“I will spank you each time you do it, do you understand?”

Very slowly he pulls down my sweatpants. Oh, how demeaning is this. Demeaning and scary and hot. He’s making such a meal of this. My heart is in my mouth, I can barely breathe. *Shit, is this going to hurt?* He places his hand on my naked behind, softly fondling me, stroking around and around with his flat palm. And then his hand is no longer there, and he hits me – hard. *Ow!* My eyes spring open in response to the pain and I try to rise, but his hand moves between my shoulder blades keeping me down. He caresses me again, where he’s hit me and I can hear his breathing’s changed – it’s harsher. He hits me again, and again, quickly, in succession. *Holy fuck it hurts.* I make no sound, my face screwed up against the pain. I try and wriggle away from the blows – spurred on by adrenaline spiking and coursing through my body.

“Keep still,” he growls. “Or I’ll spank you for longer.”

He’s rubbing me now, and the blow follows. A rhythmic pattern emerges, caress, fondle, slap hard. I have to concentrate, handle this pain. My mind empties. I have to absorb this arduous sensation. He doesn’t hit me in the same place twice in succession – he’s spreading the pain.

“Aargh!” I cry out on the tenth slap, and I’m unaware that I have been mentally counting the blows.

“I’m just getting warmed up.” He hits me again and he strokes me softly. The combination of the hard stinging blow and his gentle caress is so mind-numbing. He hits me again. This is getting harder to take. My face hurts, it’s screwed up so tight. He strokes me gently and then the blow comes. I cry out again.

“No one to hear you baby… just me.” And he hits me again, and again.

From somewhere deep inside, I want to beg him to stop. But I don’t. I don’t want to give him the satisfaction. He continues the unrelenting rhythm. I cry out six more times, eighteen slaps in total.

My body is singing… Singing from his merciless assault.

“Enough,” he breathes hoarsely. “Well done, Isabella. Now I’m going to fuck you.”

He caresses my behind gently, softly and I can feel it burning as he strokes me around and around and down. Suddenly, he inserts two fingers inside me, taking me completely by surprise. I gasp, this new assault breaking through the numbness around my brain.

“Feel this. See how much your body likes this, Isabella. You’re soaking… Just for me.” There is awe in his voice. He moves his fingers, in, out in quick succession.

I groan, no surely not, and then his fingers are gone, and I’m left wanting.

“Next time, I will get you to count. Now where’s that condom?” I feel him move as he reaches beside him for the condom. He lifts me gently and pushes me face down onto the bed, and I hear the sound of his zipper and the rip of the foil. He drags my sweatpants off and then positions me into a kneeling position, gently caressing my now very sore behind.

“I’m going to take you now. You can come,” he murmurs.

What? Like I have a choice.

And he’s inside me, quickly, filling me, I moan loudly. He moves, pounding into me, a fast intense pace, against my sore behind. The feeling is beyond exquisite, raw, and debasing and mind blowing. My senses are ravaged, disconnected, solely concentrating on what he’s doing to me, how he’s making me feel. I can feel the familiar pull deep in my belly, quickening… NO… and my traitorous body explodes in an intense, body-shattering orgasm.

"Oh, Bella!" he cries out loudly as he finds his release, holding me in place as he pours himself into me. He collapses, panting hard beside me, and in a swift gesture he pulls me on top of him and buries his face in my hair, holding me close.

"Oh baby," he breathes. "Welcome to my world."

We lie there, panting together, waiting for our breathing to slow. He gently strokes my hair. I'm on his chest again. But this time I don't have the strength to lift my hand and feel him. *Boy… I survived.* That wasn't so bad. I'm more stoic than I thought. My inner goddess is prostrate. Well, at least she's quiet. Edward nuzzles my hair again, inhaling deeply.

"Well done baby," he whispers and I can hear the quiet joy in his voice.

His words curl around my like a soft fluffy towel from the Heathman Hotel and I'm so pleased that he's happy.

He picks at the strap on my camisole.

"Is this what you sleep in?" he asks gently.

"Yes," I breathe, sleepily.

"I am so taking you shopping. You should be in silks and satins, you beautiful girl."

"I like my sweats," I murmur, trying and failing to sound irritated.

He kisses my head again. "We'll see," he says.

We lie for a few more minutes, hours, who knows… and I think I doze.

"I have to go," he says, and leaning down he kisses my forehead gently. "Are you okay?" His voice is soft.

I think about his question. My ass is sore… Well, glowing now really, and amazingly, I feel, apart from exhausted, radiant. The realization is… humbling, unexpected. I don't understand. Holy shit.

"I'm okay," I whisper. I don't want to say more than that.

He rises. "Where's your bathroom?"

"Along the corridor to the left."

He scoops up the other condom and heads out of the bedroom. I rise stiffly and put my sweatpants back on. They chafe a little against my still-smarting behind. I'm so confused by my reaction. I remember him saying – I can't remember when – that I would feel so much better after a good hiding. *How can that be so?* I really don't get it. But strangely, I do. I can't say that I enjoyed the experience, in fact I would still go a long way to avoid it, but now, this safe, weird, bathed in afterglow, sated feeling… I put my head in my hands. I just don't understand.

Edward comes back in. I can't look him in the eye. I stare down at my hands.

"I found some baby oil. Let me rub it into your behind."

What?

"No, I'll be fine."

"Isabella," he warns and I want to roll my eyes, but quickly stop myself.

I turn to stand facing the bed. He comes and sits beside me and gently pulls my sweatpants down again. *Up and down like whores' drawers* my subconscious remarks bitterly. In my head I tell her where to go. Edward squirts baby oil into his hand and then very gently rubs my behind – from makeup remover to smoothing balm for a spanked ass. Who would have thought?

"I like my hands on you," he says, and I have to agree. Me too.

"There," he says when he's finished, and gently he pulls my pants up again.

I glance over at my clock, it's 10:30.

"I'm leaving now."

"I'll see you out." I still can't look at him.

He takes my hand and leads me to the front door. Fortunately Rose is still not home. She must still be having dinner with her folks and Jasper, and I'm really glad she's not been around to hear my chastisement.

"Don't you have to call Taylor?" I ask, avoiding eye contact.

"Taylor's been here since nine. Look at me," he breathes.

I struggle to look at him, but when I do he's gazing down at me with wonder, the same look as before when I was on top of him, making love to him.

“You didn’t cry,” he murmurs and he grabs me suddenly and kisses me fervently.

“Sunday,” he whispers and it’s both a promise and a threat.

Chapter 33

I watch him walk down the path and climb into the big, black Mercedes. He doesn't look back. I close the door and stand helpless in the living room of an apartment that I shall only spend another two nights in. A place I have lived happily for almost four years. Yet today, for the first time ever, I feel lonely and uncomfortable here, unhappy with own company. Have I strayed so far from who I am? I know that lurking not very far under my rather numb exterior is a well of tears. What am I doing? The irony is I can't even sit down and enjoy a good cry… I'll have to stand.

I know it's late, but I decide to call my mom.

"Baby, how are you? How was graduation?" she enthuses down the phone. Her voice is a soothing balm.

"Sorry it's so late."

She pauses. "Bella? What's wrong?" She's all seriousness now.

"Nothing Mom, I just wanted to hear your voice."

She's silent for a moment.

"Bella, what is it? Please tell me." Her voice is soft and comforting and I know that she cares. Uninvited, my tears begin to flow. I have cried so much in the last few days.

"Please, Bella," she says and I can hear her anguish reflecting mine.

"Oh, Mom… it's a man."

"What's he done to you?" Her alarm is palpable.

"It's not like that…" *Although it is*. Oh crap, I don't want to worry her. I just want someone else to be strong for me at the moment.

"Bella, please… you're worrying me."

I take a big breath. "I've kind of fallen for this guy and he's so… different from me and I don't know if we should be together."

"Oh darling. I wish I could be with you. I am so sorry I missed your graduation. You've fallen for someone, finally… oh baby. Men… they are so tricky. They're a different species, honey. How long have you known him?"

Edward is definitely a different species… *different planet.*

"Oh, nearly three weeks or so."

"Oh Bella darling, that's no time at all. How can you possibly know someone in that kind of time-frame? Just take it easy with him and keep him at arm's length until you decide whether he's worthy of you."

Wow. It's unnerving when my mother is so insightful, but she's just too late on this. Is he *worthy* of me? That's an interesting concept. I always wonder whether I am worthy of him.

"Baby, you sound so unhappy. Come home – visit with us. I miss you, darling. Phil would love to see you, too. You can get some distance, and maybe some perspective. You need a break. You've been working so hard."

Oh boy, is this tempting. Run away. Down to Florida. Grab some sunshine, some cocktails… my mother's strange cooking. Who am I kidding – I would be cooking.

"Well, I have two job interviews in Seattle on Monday."

"Really darling? Oh, that's wonderful news."

The door opens and Rose appears, grinning at me. Her face falls when she sees I've been crying.

"Mom, I have to go. I'll think about a visit. Thank you."

"Baby, please, don't let a man get under your skin. You're far too young. Go and enjoy yourself."

"Yes, Mom. Love you."

"Oh, Bella. I love you too, so much. Be safe, baby." I hang up and face Rose who glares at me.

"Has that obscenely rich fucker upset you again?"

"No… sort of… err… yes."

“Just tell him to take a hike Bella. You've been so up and down since you met him. I've never seen you like this.”

The world of Rosalie Hale is very clear, very black and white. Not the intangible, mysterious, vague hues of grey that color my world. *Welcome to my world.*

“Sit, let’s talk. Let’s have some wine. Oh, you’ve had champagne.” She spies the bottle. “Some good stuff, too.”

I smile ineffectually, looking apprehensively at the couch. I approach it with caution. *Hmmm, sitting.*

“Are you okay?”

“I fell over and landed on my behind.”

And of course she doesn’t think to question my explanation, because I am one of the most un-coordinated people in Washington State. I never thought I’d see that as a blessing.

I sit down gingerly, pleasantly surprised that I’m okay, and turn my attention to Rose, but my mind glazes over and I’m pulled back to the Heathman. *“Well, if you were mine you wouldn’t be able to sit down for a week after the stunt you pulled yesterday.”* He said it then, and all I could concentrate on at the time was being his. All the warning signs were there, I was just too clueless and too enamored to notice.

Rose comes back into the living area with a bottle of red wine, and she’s washed the teacups.

“Here we go.” She hands me a cup of wine. It does not taste as good as the Bolly. “Bella, if he’s a jerk with commitment issues, dump him. Though I don’t really understand his commitment issues. He couldn’t take his eyes off you in the marquee. Watched you like a hawk. I’d say he was completely smitten, but maybe he has a funny way of showing it.”

Smitten! Edward! Funny way of showing it… I’ll say.

“Rose, it’s complicated. How was your evening?” I ask. I can’t talk this through with Rose without revealing too much, but one question on her day and Rose is off. It’s so reassuring to sit and listen to her normal chatter. The hot news is that Jasper may be coming to live with us after their holiday, for a short time at least, while he looks for his own place. That will be fun – Jasper is a hoot. I frown. I don’t think Edward will approve. *Well, tough.* He’ll just have to suck it up. I have a couple of teacups of wine and decide to call it a night, after one very long day. Rose hugs me, then grabs the phone to call Emmett.

I check the mean machine after I brush my teeth. There’s an email from Edward.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: You
Date: 28 May 2009 23.14
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Ms. Swan

You are quite simply exquisite. The most beautiful, intelligent, witty and brave woman I have ever met.
Take some Advil – this is not a request.
And don't drive your truck again. I will know.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Oh… Not drive my truck again. I type out my reply.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Flattery
Date: 28 May 2009 23.20
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen

Flattery will get you nowhere, but since you've been *everywhere* the point is moot.
I will need to drive my truck to a garage so I can sell it, so will not graciously accept any of your nonsense over that.
Red wine always more preferable to Advil.

Bella

PS: Caning is a HARD limit for me.

… and hit send.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Frustrating women who can't take compliments

Date: 28 May 2009 23.26
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Ms. Swan

I am not flattering you.
You should go to bed.
I accept your addition to the hard limits.
Don't drink too much.
Taylor will dispose of your truck and get a good price for it too.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Taylor - Is he the right man for the job?
Date: 28 May 2009 23.40
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Sir

I am intrigued that you are happy to risk letting your right hand man drive my truck, but not some woman you fuck occasionally.
How can I be sure that Taylor is the man to get me the best deal for said truck?
I have, in the past, probably before I met you, been known to drive a hard bargain.

Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Careful!
Date: 28 May 2009 23.44
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Ms. Swan

I am assuming it is the RED WINE talking and that you've had a very long day.
Though I am tempted to drive back over there to ensure that you don't sit down for a week, rather than an evening.
Taylor is ex-Army and capable of driving anything from a motorcycle to a Sherman Tank.
Your truck does not present a hazard to him.

Now please do not refer to yourself as ‘some woman I fuck occasionally’ because, quite frankly it makes me MAD and you really wouldn’t like me when I’m angry.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Careful yourself
Date: 28 May 2009 23.57
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen
I’m not sure I like you anyway, especially at the moment.
Ms. Swan

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Careful yourself
Date: 29 May 2009 00.03
To: Isabella Swan

Why don’t you like me?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Careful yourself.
Date: 29 May 2009 00.09
To: Edward Cullen

Because you never stay with me.

-

Well, that’s given him something to think about. I shut the machine down with a flourish I don’t really feel and crawl into my bed. I switch off my sidelight and stare up at the ceiling. It’s been one long day, one emotional wrench after another. Charlie… It was so lovely to see him. He looked well, and weirdly he approved of Edward. Jeez, Rose and her

gargantuan mouth. God, and the car. I haven't even told Rose about the new car. What was Edward thinking? And then this evening… He actually hit me. I've never been hit in my life. What have I gotten myself into? Very slowly, my tears, halted by Rose's arrival, begin to slide down the side of my face and into my ears. I have fallen for someone who's so emotionally shut down, I will only get hurt. Deep down, I know this. Someone who by his own admission is completely fucked up. *Why* is he so fucked up? It must be awful to be as affected as he is, and the thought that as a toddler he suffered some unbearable cruelty makes me cry harder. *Perhaps if he was more normal he wouldn't want you,* my subconscious contributes snidely to my musings, and in my heart of hearts I know this is true. I turn into my pillow and the sluice gates open. For the first time in years, I am sobbing uncontrollably into my pillow.

I am momentarily distracted from my dark night of the soul by Rose shouting.

What the fuck do you think you're doing here?

Well you can't!

What the fuck have you done to her now?

Since she's met you, she cries all the time.

You can't come in here!

Edward bursts into my bedroom and unceremoniously switches on the overhead light, making me squint.

"Jesus, Bella," he mutters. He flicks the switch off again and is at my side in a moment.

"What are you doing here?" I gasp between sobs. Crap, I can't stop crying.

He switches on the sidelight making me squint again. Rose comes and stands in the doorway.

"Do you want me to throw this bastard out?" she asks, radiating thermo-nuclear hostility. Edward raises his eyebrows at her, no doubt surprised by her flattering epithet and her feral antagonism.

I shake my head and she rolls her eyes at me. *Oh, I wouldn't do that near Mr. C.*

"Just holler if you need me," she says, more gently. "Cullen – your cards are marked," she spits at him. He nods at her, and she turns and pulls the door to, but doesn't close it.

Edward gazes down at me, his expression grave, his face ashen. He's wearing his pinstriped jacket and from his inside pocket he pulls out a handkerchief and hands it to me. I think I still have his other one somewhere.

"What's going on?" he asks quietly.

"Why are you here?" I ask, ignoring his question. My tears have miraculously ceased, but I'm left with dry heaves racking my body.

"Part of my role is to look after your needs. You said you wanted me to stay, so here I am. And yet I find you like this." He blinks at me, truly bewildered. "I'm sure I'm responsible, but I have no idea why. Is it because I hit you?"

I pull myself up, wincing from my sore behind. I sit and face him.

"Did you take some Advil?"

I shake my head. He narrows his eyes at me, gets up and leaves the room. I can hear him talking to Rose, but not what they are saying. He's back a few moments later with tablets and a teacup of water.

"Take these," he orders gently as he sits on my bed beside me.

I do as I'm told.

"Talk to me," he whispers. "You told me you were okay. I'd never have left you if I thought you were like this."

I stare down at my hands. What can I say that I haven't said already? I want more. I want him to stay because *he* wants to stay with me, not because I'm a blubbering mess and I don't want him to beat me. Is that so unreasonable?

"I take it that when you said you were okay, you weren't."

I flush. "I thought I was fine."

"Isabella, you can't tell me what you think I want to hear. That's not very honest," he admonishes me. "How can I trust anything you've said to me?"

I peek up at him and he's frowning, a bleak look in his eye. He runs both hands through his hair.

"How did you feel while I was hitting you… and after?"

“I didn’t like it. I’d rather you didn’t do it again.”

“You weren’t meant to like it.”

“Why do you like it?” I stare up at him.

My question surprises him. “You really want to know?”

“Oh, trust me, I’m fascinated.” And I can’t quite keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

He narrows his eyes at me again. “Careful,” he warns.

I flush. “Are you going to hit me again?” I challenge.

“No. Not tonight.”

Phew, my subconscious and I both breathe a silent sigh of relief. “So,” I prompt.

“I like the control it brings me, Isabella. I want you to behave in a particular way, and if you don’t I shall punish you, and you will learn to behave the way I desire. I enjoy punishing you. I’ve wanted to spank you since you asked me if I was gay.”

I flush at the memory. *Jeez, I wanted to spank myself after that question.* So Rosalie Hale is responsible for all this, and if she’d gone to that interview and asked her gay question, she’d be sitting here with the sore ass. I don’t like that thought. How confusing is this?

“So you don’t like the way I am.”

He stares at me, bewildered again. “I think you’re lovely the way you are.”

“So why are you trying to change me?”

“I don’t want to change you. I’d like you to be courteous and to follow the set of rules I’ve given you, and not defy me. Simple," he says.

“But you want to punish me?”

“Yes, I do.”

“That’s what I don’t understand.”

He sighs and runs his hands through his hair again. “It goes back to being 50 shades of fucked up Isabella. I need to control you. I need you to behave in a certain way, and if you

don't … I love to watch your beautiful alabaster skin, pink and warm up under my hands. It turns me on."

Holy shit. Now we're getting somewhere.

"So it's not the pain you're putting me through?"

"A bit, to see if you can take it, but that's not the whole reason. It's the fact that you are mine do with as I see fit – ultimate control over someone else. Look, I'm not explaining myself very well, I've never had to before. I've not really thought about this in any great depth. I've always been with… like-minded people," he shrugs apologetically. "And you still haven't answered my question – how did you feel afterwards?"

"Confused."

"You were sexually aroused by it Isabella." He closes his eyes briefly, and when he re-opens them and gazes at me they are smoldering green embers. His expression pulls at that dark part of me, buried in the depths of my belly – my libido, woken and tamed by him, but even now… insatiable.

"Don't look at me like that," he murmurs.

I frown. *Jeez what have I done now?*

"I don't have any condoms, Isabella, and you know, you're upset. Contrary to what your roommate believes, I'm not a priapic monster. So, you felt confused?"

I squirm under his intense gaze.

"You have no problem being honest with me in print. Your emails always tell me exactly how you feel. Why can't you do that in conversation? Do I intimidate you that much?"

I pick at an imaginary spot on my mother's blue and cream quilt.

"You dazzle me, Edward. Completely overwhelm me. I feel like Icarus flying too close to the sun," I whisper.

He gasps. "Well, I think you've got that the wrong way around."

"What?"

"Oh Isabella, you've bewitched me. Isn't it obvious?"

No, not to me. *Bewitched…* my inner goddess is staring open-mouthed. Even she doesn't believe this.

"You've still not answered my question. Write me an email, please. But right now I'd really like to sleep. Can I stay?"

"Do you want to stay?" I can't hide the hope in my voice.

"You wanted me here."

"You haven't answered my question."

"I'll write you an email," he mutters petulantly.

He stands and empties his jeans pockets of Blackberry, keys, wallet and money. Holy crow, men carry a lot of crap in their pockets. He strips off his watch, his shoes, socks and jeans and puts his jacket over my chair. He walks around to the other side of the bed and clambers in.

"Lie down," he orders.

I slide slowly under the covers, wincing only slightly, staring at him. Jeez, he's staying. I think I'm numb with elated shock.

He leans up on one elbow staring down at me.

"If you are going to cry, cry in front of me. I need to know."

"Do you want me to cry?"

"Not particularly. I just want to know how you're feeling. I don't want you slipping through my fingers. Switch the light off. It's late and we both have to work tomorrow."

So here, and still so bossy, but I can't complain… he's in my bed. I don't quite understand why. Maybe I should weep more often in front of him. I switch off the bedside light.

"Lie on your side, facing away from me," he murmurs in the darkness. I roll my eyes in the full knowledge that he cannot see me, but I do as I'm told. Gingerly he moves over and puts his arms around me and pulls me to his chest… *oh my.*

"Sleep, little one," he whispers, and I feel his nose in my hair as he inhales, deeply.

Holy crow. Edward Cullen is sleeping with me… and in the comfort and solace of his arms, I drift into a peaceful sleep.

Chapter 34

The candleflame is too hot. It flickers and dances in the over-warm breeze, a breeze that brings no respite from the heat. Soft gossamer wings flutter to and fro in the dark, sprinkling dusty scales in the circle of light. I'm struggling to resist, but I'm drawn. And then it's so bright and I am flying too close to the sun, dazzled by the light, fried and melting from the heat, weary in my endeavors to stay airborne. I am so warm… The heat, it's stifling, overpowering. It wakes me. I open my eyes and I'm draped in Edward Cullen. He's wrapped around me like a victory flag. And he's asleep with his head on my chest, his arm over me, holding me close, one of his legs thrown over and hooked around both of mine. He's suffocating me with his body heat and he's heavy. I take a moment to absorb that he's still in my bed and fast asleep and it's light outside… morning. He has spent the whole night with me.

My right arm is thrown out onto his side of the bed, no doubt in search of a cool spot, and as I process the fact that he's still with me the thought occurs that I can touch him. He's asleep. Tentatively, I lift my hand and run the tips of my fingers down his back. Deep in his throat I hear a faint distressed groan and he stirs. He nuzzles my chest, inhaling deeply and he wakes. Sleepy, blinking green eyes meet mine beneath his tousled mop of hair, and I watch as consciousness reaches him.

"Good morning," he mumbles and frowns. "Jesus, even in my sleep I'm drawn to you." He moves slowly, unpeeling himself from me as he gets his bearings. I become aware of his erection against me. He notices my wide-eyed reaction and he smiles a slow, sexy smile.

"Hmmm, this has possibilities, but I think we should wait until Sunday." He leans down and nuzzles my ear with his nose.

I flush, but then I feel seven shades of scarlet from his heat.

"You're very hot," I murmur.

"You're not so bad yourself," he murmurs and presses himself against me, suggestively. I flush some more. *That's not what I meant.* He props himself up on his elbow looking down at me, amused. He bends and, to my surprise, plants a gentle kiss on my lips.

"Sleep well?" he asks.

I nod staring up at him and realize that I slept have slept very well, except maybe for the last half-hour when I was too hot.

"So did I." He frowns. "Yeah, really well." He raises his eyebrows in confused surprise. "What's the time?"

I glance at my alarm.

"It's 7:30."

"7:30… shit." He scrambles out of bed and drags on his jeans.

It is my turn to look amused as I sit up, Edward Cullen is late and flustered. This is something I have never seen before. I belatedly realize that my behind is no longer sore.

"You are such a bad influence on me. I have a meeting. I have to go. I have to be in Portland at 8:00. Are you smirking at me?"

"Yes."

He grins. "I'm late. I don't do late. Another first Miss Swan." He pulls on his jacket and then he bends down and grasps my head, two hands on either side.

"Sunday," he says and the word is pregnant with an unspoken promise and everything deep in my body uncurls and then clenches in delicious anticipation, the feeling is exquisite. Holy crow, if my mind could just keep up with my body. He leans forward and kisses me quickly. He grabs his stuff from my side table, and his shoes – which he doesn't put on.

"Taylor will come and sort your truck. I was serious. Don't drive it. I'll see you at my place on Sunday. I'll email you a time."

And like a whirlwind he's gone. *Oh my*. Edward Cullen spent the night with me and I feel rested. And there was no sex… only… cuddling. He told me he never slept with anyone – but he has with me, three times now. Holy crow. Slowly climbing out of my bed I feel more optimistic than I have for the last day or so. I head for the kitchen. I need a cup of tea.

After breakfast, I shower and dress quickly for my last day at Newton's. It is the end of an era. Goodbye to Mr. & Mrs. Newton, WSU, Vancouver, the apartment, my truck… I glance at the mean machine – it's only 7:52. I have time.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Assault and Battery… the after-effects

Date: 29 May 2009 08.05
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen

You wanted to know why I felt confused after you – which euphemism should we apply - spanked, punished, beat, assaulted? me. Well during the whole alarming process I felt demeaned, debased, and abused. And much to my mortification, you're right, I was aroused and that was unexpected. As you are well aware, all things sexual are new to me. I only wish I was more experienced and therefore more prepared. I was shocked to feel aroused.

What really worried me was how I felt afterwards. And that's more difficult to articulate. I was happy that you were happy. I felt relieved that it wasn't as painful as I thought it would be. And when I was lying in your arms, I felt – sated. But I feel very uncomfortable, guilty even, feeling that way. It doesn't sit well with me and I'm confused as a result. Does that answer your question?

I hope the world of Mergers and Acquisitions is as stimulating as ever, and that you weren't too late. Thank you for staying with me.
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Free Your Mind
Date: 29 May 2009 08.24
To: Isabella Swan

Interesting, if slightly overstated, title heading Miss Swan.

To answer your points:

- I'll go with spanking – as that's what it was.

- So you felt demeaned, debased, abused & assaulted – how very Tess Durbeyfield of you. I believe it was you who decided on the debasement, if I remember correctly. Do you really feel like this or do you think you ought to feel like this? Two very different things. If that *is* how you feel, do you think you could just try and embrace these feelings, deal with them, for me? That's what a submissive would do.

- I am grateful for your inexperience. I value it and I'm only beginning to understand what it means. Simply put, it means that you are mine in everyway.

- Yes you were aroused, which in turn was very arousing, there's nothing wrong with that.

- Happy does not even begin to cover how I felt. Ecstatic joy comes close.

- Punishment spanking hurts far more than sensual spanking, so that's about as hard as it gets, unless of course you commit some major transgression, in which case I'll use some implement to punish you with. My hand was very sore. But I like that.

- I felt sated, too. More so than you could ever know.

- Don't waste your energy on guilt, feelings of wrongdoing, etc. We are consenting adults and what we do behind closed doors is between ourselves. You need to free your mind and listen to your body.

- The world of M&A is not nearly as stimulating as you are, Miss Swan.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Holy crow… *mine in every way.* My breath hitches.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Consenting Adults!
Date: 29 May 2009 08.26
To: Edward Cullen

Aren't you in a meeting?
I'm very glad your hand was sore.
And if I listened to my body, I'd be in Alaska by now.
Bella
PS: I will think about embracing these feelings.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: You Didn't Call the Cops
Date: 29 May 2009 08.35
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan
I am in a meeting discussing the futures market if you're really interested.
For the record, you stood beside me knowing what I was going to do.

You didn't at any time ask me to stop. You didn't use either safe word.
You are an adult, you have choices.
Quite frankly I'm looking forward to the next time my palm is ringing with pain.
You're obviously not listening to the right part of your body.
Alaska is very cold and no place to run. I would find you. I can track your cell phone – remember?

Go to work.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

I scowl at the screen. He's right of course. It's my choice. *Hmmm*. Is he serious about coming to find me, should I decide to escape for a while? My mind flits briefly to my mother's offer. I hit reply.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Stalker
Date: 29 May 2009 08.36
To: Edward Cullen

Have you sought therapy for your stalker tendencies?
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Stalker
Date: 29 May 2009 08.38
To: Isabella Swan

I pay the eminent Dr. Banner a small fortune with regard to my stalker and other tendencies.

Go to work.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Expensive Charlatans
Date: 29 May 2009 08.40
To: Edward Cullen

May I humbly suggest you seek a second opinion? I am not sure that Dr. Banner is very effective.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Second Opinions
Date: 29 May 2009 08.43
To: Isabella Swan

Not that it's any of your business, humble or otherwise, but Dr. Banner is the second opinion.
You will have to speed, in your new car, putting yourself at unnecessary risk – I think that's against the rules.
GO TO WORK.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: SHOUTY CAPITALS
Date: 29 May 2009 08.47
To: Edward Cullen

As the object of your stalker tendencies, I think it is my business actually.
I haven't signed yet. So rules schmules.
And I don't start until 9:30 today.

Miss Swan

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Descriptive Linguistics
Date: 29 May 2009 08.49
To: Isabella Swan

Schmules – not sure where that appears in Webster's Dictionary.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Descriptive Linguistics
Date: 29 May 2009 08.52
To: Edward Cullen

It's between control freak and stalker.
And descriptive linguistics is a hard limit for me.
Will you stop bothering me now?
I'd like to go to work in my new car.
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Challenging but amusing Young Women
Date: 29 May 2009 08.56
To: Isabella Swan

My palm is twitching.
Drive safely Miss Swan.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

The Volvo is a joy to drive. It has power steering. My truck has no power in it at all – anywhere, so my daily workout, which was driving my truck, will cease. Oh, but I will have a personal trainer to contend with, according to Edward's rules. I frown. I hate exercising.

While I am driving, I try and analyze our email exchange. He's a patronizing son-of-a-bitch sometimes. And then I think of Esme, and I feel guilty. But of course she wasn't his birth mother. Hmmm that's a whole world of unknown pain. Well patronizing son-of-a-bitch works well then. Yes I'm an adult, thank you for reminding me, Edward Cullen, and it is my choice. The problem is, I just want Edward, not all his… baggage. And right now he has a 747 hold's worth of baggage. Could I just lie back and embrace it? Like a

submissive? Well, I've said I'd try. It's an awfully big ask though. I pull into the parking lot at Newton's. Last day, here goes.

The shop is busy and the time passes quickly. At lunchtime Mr. Newton summons me from the stockroom. He's standing beside a motorcycle courier.

"Miss Swan?" the courier asks. I look questioningly at Mr. Newton, who shrugs, as puzzled as me. My heart sinks. What has Edward sent me now? I sign for the small package and open it straight away. It's a BlackBerry. My heart sinks further. I switch it on.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: BlackBerry ON LOAN
Date: 29 May 2009 12.15
To: Isabella Swan

I need to contact you at all times and since this is your most honest form of communication, I figured you needed a BlackBerry.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holding Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Consumerism Gone Mad
Date: 29 May 2009 13.22
To: Edward Cullen

I think you need to call Dr. Banner right now.
Your stalker tendencies are running wild.
I am at work. I will email you when I get home.
Thank you for yet another gadget.
I wasn't wrong when I said you were the ultimate consumer.
Why do you do this?
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Sagacity from one so young
Date: 29 May 2009 13.24
To: Isabella Swan

Fair point well made, as ever Miss Swan.
Dr. Banner is on vacation.
And I do this because I can.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holding Inc

-

I put the thing in my back pocket, hating it already. Emailing Edward is addictive but I am supposed to be working. It buzzes once, against my behind. How apt, I think ironically, but summoning all my willpower I ignore it.

At 4:00 pm Mr. and Mrs. Newton gather all the other employees in the shop and, during a hair-curlingly embarrassing speech, present me with a check for three hundred dollars and a pair of walking boots. In that moment, three weeks of - exams, graduation, intense fucked-up billionaires, deflowering, hard & soft limits, playrooms with no consoles, helicopter rides, and the fact that I will move tomorrow, all well up inside me. Amazingly, I hold it together. My subconscious is in awe. I hug the Newtons hard. They have been kind and generous employers and I now know more than I'll ever need to about camping equipment.

Rose is climbing out of her car when I arrive home.

"What's that?" she says accusingly, pointing at the Volvo.

I can't resist. "It's a car." She narrows her eyes at me, and for a brief moment I wonder if she's going to put me across her knee too.

"My graduation present." I try and act nonchalant. *Yes I get expensive cars given to me everyday.*

Her mouth drops open.

"Generous, over-the-top bastard isn't he?"

I nod apologetically. "I did try not to accept it, but frankly it's just not worth the fight."

Rose purses her lips. "No wonder you're so overwhelmed. I did note that he stayed."

I grin. "Yeah."

"Shall we finish packing?"

I nod and follow her inside.

I check the email from Edward.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Sunday
Date: 29 May 2009 13.40
To: Isabella Swan

Shall I see you at 1 pm Sunday?
The doctor will be at Escala to see you at 1:30.
I'm leaving for Seattle now.
I hope your move goes well and I look forward to Sunday.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holding Inc

-

I decide to email him once we've finished packing. He can be so fun, and then he can be so formal and stuffy. It's difficult to keep up. Honestly, it's like an email to an employee. I roll my eyes at it, defiantly and join Rose to pack.

Rose and I are in the kitchen when there's a knock at the door. Taylor stands on the porch, looking immaculate in his suit. I can see the trace of ex-Army in his buzz cut, trim physique, and his cool stare.

"Miss Swan," he says kindly. "I've come for your truck."

"Oh yes, of course. Come in, I'll get my keys."

Surely this is above and beyond the call of duty. I wonder again at Taylor's job description. I hand him the keys and we walk in an uncomfortable silence toward the red Chevy. I open the door and remove the flashlight from the glove box. That's it, I have nothing else that's personal in the truck.

"How long have you worked for Mr. Cullen?" I ask, suddenly.

"Four years, Miss Swan."

And suddenly I want to bombard him with questions. What this man must know about Edward, all his secrets. But then he's probably signed an NDA. I look nervously at him. He has the same taciturn expression as my father, and I warm to him.

"He's a good man, Miss Swan," he says and he smiles slightly. With that, he gives me a little nod and climbs into my truck and drives away. Apartment, truck, Newton's – it's all change now. I shake my head as I wander back inside. And the biggest change of all is Edward, and Taylor thinks he's a *good man*… Can I believe him?

Jake joins us with a Chinese take out at 8:00. We're done. We're packed and ready to go. He brings several bottles of beer and Rose and I sit on the couch whilst he's cross-legged on the floor between us. We watch crap TV, drink beer and then we fondly and loudly reminisce as the beer takes effect. It's been a good four years.

The atmosphere between Jake and I has returned to normal, the attempted kiss forgotten. Well, very much swept under the rug that my inner goddess is lying on, eating grapes and tapping her fingers, waiting not so patiently for Sunday.

There's a knock on the door and my heart leaps into my throat. Is it...?

Rose answers the door and is nearly knocked off her feet by Emmett. He seizes her in a Hollywood-style clinch that moves quickly toward a European-arthouse embrace. *Honestly, get a room*. Jake and I stare at each other. I'm appalled at their lack of modesty.

"Shall we walk down to the bar?" I ask Jake. He nods frantically. We are too uncomfortable with the unrestrained sexing unfolding in front of us.

Rose looks up at me flushed and bright-eyed.

"Jake and I are going for a quick drink." I roll my eyes at her. Ha… I can still roll my eyes in my own time.

"Okay," she grins.

"Hi Emmett, bye Emmett."

He winks a big blue eye at me and Jake and I are out of the door, giggling like teenagers.

As we stroll down to the bar I put my arm through Jake's. God, he's so uncomplicated. I hadn't really appreciated that before.

"You'll still come to the opening of my show, won't you?"

“Of course Jake, when is it?”

“June 11.”

“What day is that?” I suddenly panic.

“It’s a Thursday.”

“Yeah I should make that. And you will visit us in Seattle?”

“Try and stop me.” He grins.

Chapter 35

It's late when I arrive back from the bar. Rose and Emmett are nowhere to be seen, but boy can they be heard. *Holy crow*. I hope I'm not that loud. I know Edward isn't. I flush at the thought and escape to my room. After a brief not-at-all-awkward-thank-goodness hug, Jake has gone. I don't know when I'll see him again. Probably his photographic show, and once again I'm blown away that he finally has an exhibition. I shall miss him and his boyish charm. I couldn't bring myself to tell him about the truck. I know he'll freak when he finds out and I can only deal with one man at a time freaking out at me.

Once in my room, I check the mean machine, and of course there's an email from Edward.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Where Are You?
Date: 29 May 2009 22.14
To: Isabella Swan

'*I am at work. I will email you when I get home.'*
Are you still at work or have you packed your phone, blackberry and mac?
Call me… or I may be forced to call Emmett.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holding Inc

-

Crap. *Jake… shit*.

I grab my phone. 5 missed calls and one voice message. Tentatively I listen to the message. It's Edward.

'I think you need to learn to manage my expectations. I am not a patient man. If you say you are going to contact me when you finish work, then you should have the decency to do so. Otherwise I worry, and it's not an emotion I'm familiar with and I don't tolerate it very well. Call me.'

Holy crap. Will he ever give me a break? I scowl at the phone. He is suffocating me. With a deep dread uncurling in my stomach, I scroll down to his number and press dial. My heart is in my mouth as I wait for him to answer. He'd probably like to beat seven shades of shit out of me… *oh no*. The thought is depressing.

“Hi,” he says softly and his response knocks me off balance because I am expecting his anger but he sounds, if anything, relieved.

“Hi,” I murmur.

“I was worried about you.”

“I know. I’m sorry I didn’t reply, but I’m fine.”

He pauses for a beat. “Did you have a pleasant evening?” He is crisply polite.

“Yes. We finished packing and Rose and I shared a Chinese take-out with Jake.” I close my eyes tightly as I say Jake’s name.

He says nothing.

“How about you?” I ask to fill the sudden deafening chasm of silence. I will not let him guilt me out about Jake.

Eventually he sighs. “I went to a fundraising dinner. It was deathly dull. I left as soon as I could.”

He sounds so… sad, resigned. My heart clenches. I picture him all those nights ago sat at the piano in his huge living room and the unbearable bittersweet melancholy of the music he was playing.

“I wish you were here,” I whisper, because I have an urge to hold him. Sooth him. Even though he won’t let me. I want his proximity.

“Do you?” he murmurs blandly. *Holy crow*. This doesn’t sound like him, my scalp prickles with dawning apprehension.

“Yes,” I breathe.

After an eternity, he sighs. “I’ll see you Sunday?”

“Yes, Sunday,” I murmur and a thrill courses through my body.

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Sir.”

I can tell that my address catches him unawares by his sharp intake of breath.

“Good luck with your move tomorrow, Isabella.” His voice is soft.

And we’re both hanging on the phone like teenagers, neither wanting to hang up.

“You hang up,” I whisper.

And finally I can hear his smile.

“No, you hang up.” And I know he’s grinning.

“I don’t want to.”

“Neither do I.”

“Were you very angry with me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you still?”

“No.”

“So you’re not going to punish me?”

“No. I’m an in-the-moment kind of guy.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“You can hang up now Miss Swan.”

“Do you really want me to, Sir?”

“Go to bed, Isabella.”

“Yes. Sir.”

We both stay on the line.

“Do you ever think you’ll be able to do what you’re told?” I can hear his amused exasperation.

“Maybe. We’ll see after Sunday.” And I press 'end' on the phone.

Emmett stands and admires his handiwork. He has re-plugged our TV into the satellite system in our Pike Place Market apartment. Rose and I flop on to the couch giggling, impressed by his prowess with a power drill. The flat screen looks odd against the brickwork of the converted warehouse, but no doubt I will get used to it.

"See baby, easy." He grins a wide white-toothed smile at Rose, and she almost literally dissolves into the couch. I roll my eyes at the pair of them.

"I'd love to stay, baby, but my sister is back from Paris. It's compulsory family dinner tonight."

"Can you come by... after?" Rose asks tentatively, all soft and unRose.

I stand and make my way over to the kitchen area, on the pretence of unpacking one of the boxes. They are going to get icky.

"I'll see if I can escape," he promises.

"I'll come down with you." Rose smiles.

"Laters Bella." Emmett grins.

"Bye Emmett. Say hi to Edward from me."

"Just hi?" His eyebrows shoot up suggestively.

"Yes." I flush.

He winks at me, and I go crimson as he follows Rose out of the apartment.

Emmett is adorable, and so different from Edward. He's warm, open, physical… very physical… too physical, with Rose. They can barely keep their hands off each other. To be honest, it's embarrassing, and I am pea-green with envy.

Rose returns about twenty minutes later with pizza and we sit, surrounded by boxes, in our new open space, eating straight from the box. Rose's Dad has done us proud. The apartment is not large, but it's big enough, three bedrooms and a large living space that looks out on to Pike Street Market itself. It's all solid wood floors and red brick, and the kitchen tops are smooth concrete, very utilitarian… very now. And we both love that we will be in the heart of the city.

At eight, the entry-phone buzzes. Rose leaps up - and my heart leaps into my mouth.

“Delivery, Miss Swan, Miss Hale.” Disappointment flows freely and unexpectedly through my veins... It's not Edward.

“First floor, apartment 2.”

Rose buzzes the delivery boy in. His mouth falls open when he sees Rose, all tight jeans, t-shirt, blond hair piled high with escaping tendrils. She has that effect on men. He holds a bottle of champagne with a helicopter-shaped balloon attached. She gives him a dazzling smile to send him on his way, and proceeds to read the card out to me.

Ladies, Good luck in your new home, Edward Cullen.

Rose shakes her head in disapproval. “Why can’t he just put Edward? And what’s with the weird helicopter balloon?”

“Echo Charlie.”

“What?”

“Edward flew me to Seattle in his helicopter.” I shrug apologetically.

Rose stares at me open mouthed. I have to say, I love these occasions. Rosalie Hale, silent and floored, they are so rare. I take a brief and luxurious moment to enjoy it.

“Yep, he has a helicopter, which he flew himself,” I state very slowly.

“Of course the obscenely rich bastard has a helicopter. Why didn’t you tell me?” Rose looks accusingly at me, but she's smiling, shaking her head in disbelief.

“Oh, I’ve had a lot on my mind lately.”

She frowns at me. “Are you going to be okay while I’m away?”

“Of course.” I answer reassuringly. *New city, no job, nut-job boyfriend.*

“Did you give him our address?

“No, but stalking is one of his specialties,” I muse matter-of-fact.

Rose frowns. “Somehow I'm not surprised. He worries me Bella. Well, at least it’s a good champagne and it’s chilled.”

Of course, only Edward would send chilled champagne, or get his secretary to do it… or maybe Taylor. We open it there and then and find our teacups - well, they were the last items to be packed.

"Bollinger Grande Année Rosé 1999, an excellent vintage." I grin at Rose, and we clink teacups.

I wake early to a grey Sunday morning after a surprisingly refreshing night's sleep and lie awake staring at my boxes.*You should really be unpacking these,* my subconscious nags, pursing her harpy lips together. *No, today's the day*. My inner goddess is beside herself, hopping from foot to foot. Anticipation hangs heavy and portentous over my head like a dark tropical storm-cloud. Butterflies flood my belly, as well as a darker, carnal, captivating ache as I try to imagine what he will do to me. And of course, I have to sign that bloody contract… or do I?

I hear the ping of incoming mail from the mean machine on the floor beside my bed.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: My Life in Numbers
Date: 30 May 2009 8.04
To: Isabella Swan

If you drive, you'll need this access code for the underground garage at Escala: 146963
Park in bay 5 – it's one of mine.
Code for the elevator: 1880

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holding Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: An excellent Vintage
Date: 30 May 2009 8.08
To: Edward Cullen

Yes Sir... Understood.
Thank you for the champagne, and the blow-up Echo Charlie, which is now tied to my bed.
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Envy
Date: 30 May 2009 8.11
To: Isabella Swan

You're welcome.
Don't be late.
Lucky Echo Charlie

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holding Inc

-

I roll my eyes at his bossiness, but his last line makes me smile. I head for the shower room, wondering if Emmett made it back last night and trying hard to rein in my nerves.

I can drive the Volvo in high-heels! At 12:55 precisely I pull into the garage at Escala and park up in bay 5. How many bays does he own? The Mercedes SUV is there, the R8, and two Volvo SUVs… *hmmm*. I check my seldom-worn mascara in the light up vanity mirror on my sunshield. Didn't have one of these in the Chevy.

Go girl! My inner goddess has her pom poms in hand - she's in cheerleading mode.

In the infinity mirrors of the elevator I check out my plum dress, well, Rose's plum dress. The last time I wore this he wanted to peel it off me. My body clenches at the thought. Oh my. The feeling is just exquisite and I catch my breath. I'm wearing the underwear that Taylor bought for me. I flush at the thought of his buzz cut roaming the aisles of Agent Provocateur or wherever he bought it. The doors open and I'm facing the foyer of apartment number one.

Taylor stands at the double doors as I step out of the elevator.

"Good afternoon, Miss Swan," he says.

"Oh please call me Bella."

"Bella," he smiles.

"Mr. Cullen is expecting you."

I bet he is.

Edward is seated on his living room couch reading the Sunday papers. He glances up as Taylor directs me into the living area. The room is exactly as I remember it. It's been a whole week since I've been here, but it feels so much longer. Edward looks cool and calm. Actually, he looks heavenly. He's in a loose white linen shirt and jeans, no shoes or socks. His copper-colored hair is tousled and unkempt and his green eyes twinkle wickedly at me. He is jaw-droppingly handsome. He rises and strolls towards me, an amused appraising smile on his beautiful sculptured lips.

I stand immobilized at the entrance of the room, paralyzed by his beauty and my the sweet anticipation of what's to come. I can feel the familiar charge between us sparking slowly in my belly, drawing me to him.

"Hmmm… that dress," he murmurs approvingly as he gazes down at me. "Welcome back Miss Swan," he whispers and clasping my chin, he leans down and proffers a gentle, light kiss on my lips. The touch of his lips to mine reverberates throughout my body. My breath hitches.

"Hi," I whisper as I flush.

"You're on time. I like punctual. Come."

He takes my hand and leads me to the couch.

"I wanted to show you something," he says as we sit.

He hands me the Seattle Times. On page 8 there's a photograph of the two of us together at the graduation ceremony. *Holy crap*. I'm in the paper. I check the caption.

Edward Cullen and friend at the graduation ceremony at WSU Vancouver.

I laugh. "So I'm your 'friend' now."

"So it would appear. And it's in the newspapers, so it must be true," he smirks.

He sits beside me, his whole body turned toward me, one of his legs tucked under the other. He reaches over and pulls my hair behind my ear with his long index finger. My body comes alive at his touch, waiting, needful.

"So Isabella, you have a much better idea of what I'm about since you were last here."

"Yes." *Where's he going with this?*

“And yet you’ve returned, and here you sit.”

I nod shyly at him and his green eyes blaze at me. He shakes his head slightly as if he's struggling with the idea.

“Have you eaten?” he asks out of the blue.

Shit. “No.”

“Are you hungry?” He’s really trying not to look annoyed.

“Not for food,” I whisper and his nostrils flare slightly in reaction.

He leans forward and whispers in my ear. “You are as eager as ever Miss Swan, and just to let you into a little secret, so am I. But Dr. Greene is due here shortly.” He sits up. “I wish you’d eat,” he scolds me mildly. My heated blood cools. Holy Moses, the doctor… I’d forgotten.

“What can you tell me about Dr. Greene?” I ask to distract us both.

“She’s the best Ob Gyn in Seattle. What more can I say?” He shrugs.

“I thought I was seeing your doctor, and don’t tell me you’re really a woman, because I won’t believe you.”

He gives me a don’t-be-ridiculous look.

“I think it’s more appropriate that you see a specialist. Don’t you?” he says mildly.

I nod. Holy crow. And if she’s the best Ob Gyn, he’s got her out to see me on a Sunday – at lunchtime! I cannot begin to imagine how much that costs.

Edward frowns suddenly, as if recalling something unpleasant.

“Isabella, my mother would like you to come to dinner this evening. I believe Emmett is asking Rose, too. I don’t know how you feel about that. It will be very odd for me to introduce you to my family.”

Odd? Why?

“Are you ashamed of me?” I can’t keep the wounded hurt out of my voice.

“Of course not.” He rolls his eyes at me.

“Well then, why is it odd?”

“Because I’ve never done it before.”

“Why are you allowed to roll your eyes and I’m not?”

He blinks at me. “I wasn’t aware that I was.”

“Well neither am I, usually,” I snap at him.

Edward glares at me, speechless. Taylor appears at the doorway.

“Dr. Greene is here sir.”

“Show her up to Miss Swan’s room.”

Miss Swan’s room!

“Ready for some contraception?” he asks as he stands and he holds out his hand to me.

“You’re not going to come as well are you?” I gasp, shocked.

He laughs. “I’d pay very good money to watch, believe me Isabella, but I don’t think the good doctor would approve.”

I take his hand and he pulls me up into his arms and he kisses me deeply. I clutch on to his arms taken by surprise. His hand is in my hair holding my head and he pulls me against him, his forehead against mine.

“I’m so glad you’re here,” he whispers. “I can’t wait to get you naked.”

Chapter 36

Dr. Greene is tall, blond, and immaculate, dressed in a royal blue suit. I'm reminded of the women who work in Edward's office. She's like an Identikit model – another Stepford Blond. Her long hair swept up in an elegant chignon. She must be in her early forties.

"Mr. Cullen…" She shakes Edwards outstretched hand.

"Thank you for coming at such short notice," Edward says.

"Thank you for making it worth my while, Mr. Cullen. Miss Swan." She smiles at me.

We shake hands and I know she's one of those women who doesn't tolerate fools gladly... Like Rose. I like her immediately. She stares at Edward expectantly and rather belatedly, he takes his cue.

"I'll be downstairs," he mutters and he leaves what will be my bedroom.

"Well Miss Swan, Mr. Cullen is paying me a small fortune to attend to you. What can I do for you?"

After a more than thorough examination and lengthy discussion, Dr. Greene and I decide on the mini pill. Well, it was a toss up between that and the IUD, but mini pill it is. She writes me a pre-paid prescription and tells me to pick them up tomorrow. I love her no-nonsense attitude – she has lectured me until she's as blue as her dress about taking it at the same time every day. And I can tell she's burning with curiosity about my so-called relationship with Mr. Cullen. I don't give her any details. Somehow I don't think she'd look so calm and collected if she'd seen his red room of pain. I flush as we pass its closed door and walk back downstairs to the art gallery that is Edward's living room.

Edward is once again seated on his couch reading. A breathtaking aria is playing on the music system, swirling round him, cocooning him, filling the room with a sweet, soulful song. He looks so serene. He turns and glances at us when we enter, and smiles warmly at me.

"Are you done?" he asks as if he's genuinely interested. He points the remote at a sleek white box beneath the fireplace that houses his iPod and the music fades slightly, but the exquisite melody continues in the background. He stands and strolls towards us.

"Yes, Mr. Cullen. Look after her, she's a beautiful, bright young woman."

Edward is slightly taken aback, as am I. What an inappropriate thing for a doctor to say. Edward recovers himself.

“I fully intend to,” he mutters, bemused.

I look at him and shrug, embarrassed.

“I’ll send you my bill,” she says crisply as she shakes his hand.

“Good day, and good luck to you Bella.” She smiles warmly as we shake hands.

Taylor appears from nowhere to escort her through the double doors and out to the elevator. How does he do that? Where does he lurk?

“How was that?” Edward asks.

“Fine, thank you. She said that I had to abstain from all sexual activity for the next four weeks.”

Edward’s mouth drops open in shock, and I cannot keep a straight face any longer and grin at him like an idiot.

“Gotcha!”

He narrows his eyes at me, and I immediately stop laughing. In fact, he looks really forbidding. *Oh shit.* My subconscious quails in the corner as all the blood drains from my face and I imagine him putting me across his knee again.

“Gotcha!” he says and smirks. He grabs me around my waist and pulls me up against him. “You are incorrigible Miss Swan,” he murmurs staring down into my eyes and he puts his hands in my hair and bends down and kisses me… hard. I cling to his muscular arms for support.

“As much as I’d like to take you here, now, you need to eat, and so do I. I don’t want you passing out on me later,” he murmurs against my lips.

"Is that all you want me for... my body?" I whisper.

"That and your smart mouth," he breathes. He kisses me again passionately, and then abruptly releases me, taking my hand and leading me to the kitchen.

I am reeling. One minute we’re joking and the next… I fan my heated face. He’s just sex on legs, and now I have to recover my equilibrium and eat something. The aria is still playing in the background.

“What’s the music?”

“Villa Lobos, an aria from Bachianas Brasileiras. Sublime isn’t it?”

“Yes,” I murmur in total agreement.

The breakfast bar is laid for two; Edward takes a salad bowl from the fridge.

“Chicken caesar salad okay with you?”

Oh thank heavens, nothing too heavy.

“Yes, fine, thank you.”

I watch as he moves gracefully through his kitchen. So at ease with his body on one level, but then, he doesn’t like to be touched. No man is an island, I muse – except perhaps Edward Cullen.

“What are you thinking?” he asks suddenly, pulling me from my reverie.

I flush. “I was just watching the way you move.”

He raises an eyebrow at me, amused.

“And?” he says dryly.

I flush some more. “Well, you’re very graceful.”

“Why thank you Miss Swan,” he murmurs.

He sits down beside me holding a bottle of wine.

“Chablis?”

“Please.”

“Help yourself to salad,” he says softly.

As I serve myself he asks, “Tell me - what method did you opt for?”

I am momentarily thrown by his question, when I realise he’s talking about Dr. Greene’s visit.

“Mini pill.”

He frowns slightly.

“And will you remember to take it regularly, at the right time, every day?”

Jeez, of course I will. How does he know? I flush at the thought… probably from one or more of the fifteen.

“I’m sure you’ll remind me,” I murmur dryly.

He glances at me with a look of amused condescension.

“I’ll put an alarm on my calendar.” He smirks. “Eat.”

The chicken caesar is delicious. To my surprise, I’m famished, and for the first time since I’ve been with him I finish my meal before he does. The wine is crisp, clean and fruity.

“Eager as ever Miss Swan?” he smiles down at my empty plate.

I look at him from beneath my lashes. “Yes,” I whisper.

His breath hitches. And as he stares down at me, I can feel the atmosphere between us slowly shift, evolve… charge. His look goes from dark to smoldering, taking me with him. He stands, closing the distance between us, and pulls me off my bar stool into his arms.

“Do you want to do this?” he breathes looking down at me intently.

“I haven’t signed anything.”

“I know, but I’m breaking all the rules now.”

“Are you going to hit me?”

“Yes, but it won’t be to hurt you. I don’t want to hurt you right now. If you’d caught me yesterday evening, well, that would have been a different story.”

Holy crow. He *wants* to hurt me. How do I deal with this? I can’t hide the horror on my face.

“Don’t let anyone try and convince you otherwise, Isabella. One of the reasons people like me do this is because we either like to give, or receive pain. It’s very simple. You don’t, so I spent a great deal of time yesterday thinking about that.”

He pulls me against him. I can feel his erection. I should run, but I can't. I'm drawn to him, on some deep, elemental level.

"Did you come any conclusions?" I whisper.

“No, and right now, I just want to tie you up and fuck you senseless. Are you ready for that?”

“Yes,” I breathe as everything in my body tightens at once… wow.

“Good. Come.” He takes my hand and, leaving all the dirty dishes on the breakfast bar, we head upstairs.

My heart starts pounding… This is it. I’m really going to do this. My inner goddess is spinning like a world-class ballerina, pirouette after pirouette. He opens the door to his playroom, stands back for me to walk through and I am once more in the red room of pain.

It’s the same, the smell of leather, citrus, polish and dark wood, all very sensual. My blood is running heated and scared through my system. Adrenaline mixed with lust and longing. It’s a heady, potent cocktail. Edward’s stance has changed completely, subtly altered, harder… meaner. He gazes down at me and his eyes are heated, lustful... hypnotic.

“When you’re in here, you are completely mine,” he breathes, each word slow and measured. “To do with as I see fit. Do you understand?”

His gaze is so intense. I nod, my mouth dry, my heart thumping for a way out of my chest.

“Take your shoes off,” he orders softly.

I swallow, and rather clumsily I take them off. He bends and picks them up and deposits them beside the door.

“Good. Don’t hesitate when I ask you to do something. Now I’m going to peel you out of this dress, something I’ve wanted to do for a few days if I recall. I want you to be comfortable with your body, Isabella. You have a beautiful body, and I like to look at it, it really is a joy to behold. In fact, I could gaze at you all day, and I want you unembarrassed and unashamed of your nakedness. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

"Yes what?" He leans over me, glaring.

"Yes, Sir."

“Do you mean that?” he snaps at me.

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. Lift your arms up over your head.”

I do as I’m told and he reaches down and grabs the hem and very slowly but smoothly he pulls it up, over my thighs, my hips, my belly, my breasts, my shoulders and over my head. He stands back to examine me and absentmindedly folds my dress, not taking his eyes off me. He places it on the large chest beside the door. Reaching up he pulls at my chin, his touch searing me.

“You’re biting your lip,” he breathes. “You know what that does to me,” he adds darkly. “Turn around.”

I turn immediately, no hesitation. He unclasps my bra and then taking both straps, he slowly pulls them down my arms, brushing my skin with his fingers and the tip of his thumbnails as he slides my bra off. His touch sends shivers down my spine, waking every nerve-ending in my body. He’s standing behind me. I can feel the heat radiating from him, warming me, warming me all over. He pulls my hair so it’s all hanging down my back, grasps a handful at my nape, and angles my head to one side. He runs his nose down my exposed neck inhaling all the way and then back up to my ear. The muscles in my belly clench, carnal and wanting. Jeez, he’s hardly touched me and I want him.

“You smell as divine as ever Isabella,” he whispers and places a soft kiss beneath my ear. I moan.

“Quiet,” he breathes. “Don’t make a sound.”

He releases my hair.

“Turn around,” he orders.

I do as I am bid, my breathing shallow, fear and longing mixed together… intoxicating.

“When I tell you to come in here, this is how you will dress. Just in your panties. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Yes what?” He glowers at me.

“Yes, Sir.”

A trace of a smile lifts the corner of his mouth.

“Good girl.” His eyes burn into mine. “When I tell you to come in here, I expect you to kneel over there.” He points to a spot beside the door. “Do it now.”

I blink at him and turn and go and kneel as directed.

"You can sit back on your heels."

I do as I'm bid.

"Place your hands and forearms flat on your thighs. Good. Now part your knees… wider… wider. Perfect. Look down at the floor." He walks over to me and I can see his feet and shins in my field of vision. Naked feet. I should be taking notes if he wants me to remember. He reaches down and grasps my hair again and pulls my head back so I am looking up at him… it's only just not painful.

"Will you remember this position Isabella?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Stay here, don't move."

He leaves and I'm on my knees, waiting. What is he going to do to me? Where's he gone? Time shifts. I have no idea how long he leaves me like this… a few minutes, five, ten? My breathing becomes shallower, the anticipation is devouring me from the inside out.

And suddenly he's back – and I feel at once calmer and more excited in the same breath. *Could I be more excited?* I have not moved. *Wow…* I can hardly believe it.

I can see his feet. He's changed his jeans. These are older, ripped, soft, over-washed. Holy Moses… these jeans are hot. He shuts the door and hangs something on the back.

"Good girl, Isabella. You look lovely like that. Well done. Stand up."

I stand but keep my face down.

"You may look at me."

I peek up at him and he's staring at me intently, assessing. I can see his eyes soften. He's taken off his shirt. Oh my, I want to touch him. The top button of his jeans is undone.

"I'm going to chain you now Isabella. Give me your right hand."

I give him my hand. He turns it palm up, and before I know it, he swats the center with a riding crop I hadn't noticed is in his right hand. It happens so quickly that the surprise hardly registers. Even more astonishing – it doesn't hurt, just a slight ringing sting.

"How does that feel?" he asks.

I blink at him, confused.

“Answer me.”

“Okay.” I frown slightly.

“Don’t frown.”

I blink and try for impassive. I succeed.

“Did that hurt?”

“No.”

“This is not going to hurt. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” My voice is uncertain. *Is it really not going to hurt?*

“I mean it,” he says. Jeez… My breathing is so shallow. Does he know what I’m thinking?

He shows me the crop. It’s brown plaited leather. My eyes jerk up to meet his and they are alight with fire and a trace of amusement.

“We aim to please Miss Swan,” he murmurs. “Come.” He takes my elbow and moves me to beneath the grid. He reaches up and takes down some shackles, with black leather cuffs.

“This grid is designed so the shackles move across the grid.”

I glance up. Holy crow, it’s like the London tube map.

“We’re going to start here, but I want to fuck you standing up, so we’ll end up by the wall over there.” He points with the riding crop to where the large wooden X is on the wall.

“Put your hands above your head.”

I do as I’m told. I feel like I’m exiting my body, a casual observer of events as they unfold in front of me. Dispassionately I can see this is beyond fascinating, beyond erotic. It’s singularly the most exciting and scary thing I’ve ever done. I’m entrusting myself to a beautiful man who, by his own admission, is fifty shades of fucked-up. I feel a brief thrill of fear. Rose and Emmett, they know I’m here.

He stands very close as he fastens the cuffs. I’m staring at his chest. His proximity is heavenly. He smells of bodywash and Edward, an inebriating mix and that drags me back

into the now. I want to run my nose and tongue through that smattering of chest hair. I could just lean forward…

He steps back and gazes at me, his expression hooded, salacious, carnal. I am helpless, my hands tied, but just looking at his lovely face, reading his need and longing for me, I can feel the dampness between my legs.

He walks slowly around me.

"You look mighty fine trussed up like this Miss Swan. And your smart mouth, quiet for now… I like that."

Standing in front of me again, he hooks his fingers into my panties and at a most unhurried pace, peels them down my legs, stripping me agonizingly slowly, so that he ends up kneeling in front of me. Not taking his eyes off mine, he scrunches my panties in his hand, holds them up to his nose and inhales deeply. *Holy fuck*. He grins wickedly at me and tucks them into the pocket of his jeans.

Uncoiling from the floor, rising lazily, like a jungle cat, he points the end of the riding crop at my navel, leisurely circling it – tantalizing me. At the touch of the leather, I quiver and gasp. He walks around me again trailing the crop around the middle of my body. On his second circuit he suddenly flicks the crop, and it hits me, underneath my behind, against my sex. I cry out in surprise as all my nerve endings stand to attention. I pull against the restraints. The shock runs through me, and it's the sweetest strangest, hedonistic feeling.

"Quiet," he whispers and he walks around me again. The crop is slightly higher around the middle of my body and this time, when he flicks it against me in the same place I'm anticipating it. Oh my. My body convulses at the sweet, stinging bite.

As he makes his way around me he flicks again, this time hitting my nipple, and I throw my head back as my nerve endings sing. He hits the other, a brief, swift, sweet chastisement. My nipples harden and elongate from the assault and I moan loudly, pulling on my leather cuffs.

"Does that feel good?" he breathes.

"Yes."

He hits me again, across the buttocks.

"Yes what?"

"Yes Sir," I whimper.

He comes to a stop, but I can no longer see him. My eyes are closed as I try to absorb the myriad of sensations coursing through my body. Very slowly, he rains small biting licks of the crop down my belly, heading south. I know where this is leading, and I try and psyche myself up for it, but when he hits my clitoris, I cry out, loudly.

"Oh… please!" I groan.

"Quiet," he orders and he hits me again on my behind.

I did not expect this to be like this. I am lost. Lost in a sea of sensation. And suddenly he's dragging the crop against my sex, through my pubic hair, down to the entrance of my vagina.

"See how wet you are for this, Isabella. Open your eyes and your mouth."

I do as I'm told, in his sexual thrall.

He pushes the tip of the crop into my mouth, like my dream… *holy shit.*

"See how you taste. Suck… Suck hard, baby."

My mouth closes around the crop as my eyes lock on his. I can taste the rich leather and the saltiness of my arousal. His eyes are blazing. He's in his element.

He pulls the tip from my mouth, stands forward and grabs me and kisses me hard. His tongue invading my mouth. Wrapping his arms around me, he pulls me against him and I feel his chest against mine and I itch to touch, but I can't. My hands, useless above me.

"Oh, Isabella you taste so fine," he breathes. "Shall I make you come?"

"Please," I beg.

The crop bites my buttock.

"Please what?"

"Please Sir."

He smiles at me, triumphant.

"With this?" He holds the crop up so I can see it.

"Yes Sir."

“Are you sure?” He looks sternly at me.

“Yes, please Sir.”

“Close your eyes.”

I shut the room out, him out, the crop out.

And he starts small, biting licks of the crop against my belly once more, moving down. Soft, small licks against my clitoris, once, twice, three times and that’s it – I can take no more. I come, gloriously, loudly, sagging weakly, and his arms curl around me as my legs turn to jelly. I dissolve, mewling and whimpering, as the aftershocks of my orgasm consume me, in his arms, my head against his chest. He lifts me and suddenly we’re moving, my arms still tethered above my head, and I can feel the cool wood of the polished cross at my back, and he’s unzipping his jeans. He puts me down against the cross briefly while he puts on a condom and then his hands wrap around my thighs as he lifts me again.

“Lift your legs baby, wrap them around me...”

And I feel so weak, but I do as he asks, as he wraps my legs around his hips and positions himself beneath me. With one thrust he’s inside me and I cry out again and I hear his muffled moan at my ear. My arms are resting on his shoulders as he thrusts into me. Jeez, it’s deep this way. He thrusts again and again, his face at my neck. I can hear his harsh breathing, and I can feel the build up again… Jeez no, not again… I don’t think my body will withstand another earth-shattering moment. But I have no choice, and with an inevitability that’s becoming familiar, I let go and come again. And it’s sweet and agonizing and intense, and I lose all sense of self. Edward follows, shouting his release through clenched teeth and holding me hard and close as he does.

He pulls out of me swiftly and sets me down against the cross, his body supporting mine. Unbuckling the cuffs he frees my hands and we both sink to the floor. He pulls me into his lap, cradling me, and I lean my head against his chest. If I had the strength, I'd touch him, but I don't. Belatedly I realize he's still wearing his jeans.

“Well done, baby,” he murmurs. “Did that hurt?”

“No,” I breathe. I can barely keep my eyes open. *Why am I so tired?*

“Did you expect it to?” he whispers as he holds me close, his fingers pushing my hair off my face.

“Yes.”

“You see most of your fear is in your head, Isabella," he pauses. "Would you do it again?”

I think for a moment as fatigue clouds my brain… *Again?*

“Yes.” My voice is so soft.

He hugs me tightly. “Good. So would I,” he murmurs and he leans down and softly kisses the top of my head. "And I haven't finished with you yet."

Chapter 37

Not finished with me yet. Holy Moses… There's no way I can do any more. I am utterly spent and fighting an overwhelming desire to sleep. I'm leaning against his chest, my eyes are closed, and he's wrapped around me – arms and legs – and I feel… safe, and oh so comfortable. Will he let me sleep… perchance to dream? My mouth quirks up at the silly thought and I turn my face into Edward's chest to inhale his unique scent and nuzzle him, but immediately he tenses. Oh crap. I open my eyes and glance up at him. He's staring down at me.

"Don't," he breathes in warning.

I flush and look back at his chest in longing. I want to run my tongue through the hair, kiss him, and for the first time I notice he has a few random and faint small round scars dotted around… *chicken pox? measles?* I think absently.

"Kneel by the door," he orders as sits back, putting his hands on his knees effectively releasing me. No longer warm, the temperature of his voice has dropped several degrees.

I stumble clumsily up into a standing position and scoot over to the door and kneel as instructed. I feel shaky and very, very tired… monumentally confused. Who would have thought I could have found such gratification in this room? Who could have thought it would be so *exhausting?* My limbs are deliciously heavy, sated. My inner goddess has a 'do not disturb' sign on the outside of her room.

Edward is moving about. I can see him in the periphery of my vision. My eyes start to droop.

"Boring you, am I Miss Swan?"

I jump awake and Edward is standing in front of me, his arms crossed glaring down at me. Oh shit, caught napping. This is not going to be good. His eyes soften as I gaze up at him.

"Stand up," he orders.

I climb warily to my feet. He stares at me, and his mouths quirks up.

"You're shattered aren't you?"

I nod shyly, flushing.

"Stamina, Miss Swan." He narrows his eyes at me. "I haven't had my fill of you yet. Hold out your hands in front as if you're praying." I blink at him. *Praying! Praying for you to go easy on me.* I do as I'm told. He takes a cable tie and fastens it around my wrists, tightening the plastic. Holy crow. A plastic cable tie, where's the grey silk one? I stare up at him as adrenaline spikes though my body anew. Okay – that's got my attention – I'm awake now.

"I have scissors here." He holds them up for me to see. "I can cut you out of this in a moment."

I try to pull my wrists apart, testing my bonds, and as I do, the plastic bites into my flesh. It's sore, but if I relax my wrists they're fine – the tie is not cutting into my skin.

"Come." He takes my hands and leads me over to the four-poster bed. I notice now that it has dark red sheets on it, and a shackle at each corner.

"I want more – much, much more," he leans down and whispers in my ear. And my heartbeat starts pounding again. Oh boy. "But I'll make this quick… You're tired. Hold on to the post," he says.

I frown. *Not on the bed then?* But find I can part my hands, and I grasp the ornately carved wooden post.

"Lower," he orders. "Good. Don't let go. If you do, I'll spank you. Understand?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good."

He stands behind me and grasps my hips, then quickly lifts me backwards so I'm bending forward, holding the post.

"Don't let go Isabella," he warns. "I'm going to fuck you hard from behind. Hold the post to support your weight. Understand?"

"Yes."

He smacks me across my behind with his hand. *Ow.* It stings.

"Yes Sir," I mutter quickly.

"Part your legs." He puts his leg between mine and, holding my hips, he pushes my right leg to the side.

"That's better. After this I'll let you sleep."

Sleep? I'm panting… I'm not thinking of sleep now. He reaches up and gently strokes my back.

"You have such beautiful skin, Isabella," he breathes and he bends down and kisses me along my spine, gentle feather-light kisses. At the same time his hands move around to my front, palming my breasts and as he does this he traps my nipples between his fingers and pulls them gently.

I stifle my moan as I feel my whole body respond, coming alive once more, for him.

He gently bites and sucks me at my waist, tugging my nipples and my hands tighten on the exquisitely carved post. His hands drop away and I hear the now familiar tear of foil and he kicks off his jeans.

"You have such an alluring sexy ass, Isabella Swan… what I'd like to do to it." His hands smooth and shape each of my buttocks and then his fingers glide down and he slips two fingers inside me.

"So wet. You never disappoint Miss Swan," he whispers and I can hear the wonder in his voice.

"Hold tight. This is going to be quick, baby."

He grabs my hips and positions himself, and I brace myself for his assault, but he reaches over me and grabs my hair near the end and winds it around his wrist to my nape holding my head in place. Very slowly, he eases into me pulling my hair at the same time. *Oh the fullness.* He eases out of me slowly, and his other hand grabs my hip, holding tight and then he slams into me. Jolting me forward.

"Hold on Isabella!" he shouts through clenched teeth.

I grip harder around the post and push back against him as he continues his merciless onslaught, again, again, his fingers digging into my hip. My arms are aching, my legs feel uncertain, my scalp is getting sore from his tugging my hair, and I can feel a gathering deep inside me. Oh no… And for the first time I fear my orgasm. If I come, I'll collapse. Edward continues to move, roughly against me, in me, his breathing harsh, moaning, groaning. Oh no, my body is responding... *how?* I can feel a quickening. But suddenly Edward stills, slamming really deep.

"Come on Bella, give it to me," he groans and my name on his lips sends me over the edge as I become all body and spiraling sensation and sweet, sweet release… and then completely and utterly mindless.

When sense returns, I'm lying on him. He's on the floor and I'm lying on top of him, my back to his front and I'm staring at the ceiling… all post-coital, glowing, shattered.

Oh, the karabiners, I think absently – I'd forgotten about those.

Edward nuzzles my ear.

"Hold up your hands," he says softly.

My arms feel like they're made of lead, but I hold them up. He wields the scissors and passes one blade under the plastic.

"I declare this Bella open," he breathes, and cuts the plastic.

I giggle and rub my wrists as they're freed.

I feel his grin.

"That is such a lovely sound," he says wistfully.

He sits suddenly, taking me with him so that I'm once more sitting in his lap.

"That's my fault," he says.

What?

I stare up trying to understand what he means.

"That you don't giggle more often."

"I'm not a great giggler," I mumble sleepily.

"Oh but when it happens Miss Swan, 'tis a wonder and joy to behold."

"Very flowery Mr. Cullen," I mutter.

His eyes soften and he smiles.

"I'd say you're thoroughly fucked and in need of sleep."

"That wasn't flowery at all," I grumble playfully.

He grins and gently lifts me off him and he stands, gloriously naked. I wish momentarily I was more awake to really appreciate him. He picks up his jeans and puts them back on, commando.

"Don't want to frighten Taylor, or Mrs. Cope for that matter," he mutters.

Hmmm… they must know what a kinky bastard he is. The thought preoccupies me.

He stoops to help me to my feet and leads me to the door, on the back of which hangs a grey waffle robe. He patiently dresses me, as if I'm a small child. I don't have the strength to lift my arms. When I'm covered and respectable, he leans down and kisses me gently.

And his mouth quirks up in a smile.

"Bed," he says.

Oh no.

"For sleep," he adds reassuringly when he sees my expression.

And very suddenly he scoops me up and carries me curled against his chest to the room along the corridor where earlier today Dr. Greene examined me. My head drops against his chest. I am exhausted. I don't remember ever being this tired.

Pulling back the duvet he lays me down, and even more surprisingly, climbs in beside me and holds me close.

"Sleep now gorgeous girl," he whispers, and he kisses my hair.

And before I can make a snarky comment, I'm asleep.

I can feel soft kisses at my temple and part of me wants to turn and respond but mostly I want to stay asleep. I moan and burrow into my pillow.

"Isabella, wake up." Edward's voice is soft, cajoling.

"No," I moan.

"We have to leave in half an hour for dinner… at my parents'." I can hear his amusement.

I open my eyes reluctantly. Edward is leaning over me. It's dark outside. He's looking at me intently.

“Come on sleepy-head. Get up.”

He stoops down and kisses me again.

“I’ve bought you a drink. I’ll be downstairs. Don’t go back to sleep, or you’ll be in trouble,” he threatens, but his tone is mild. He leans over, kisses me briefly, and exits, leaving me blinking sleep from my eyes in the overwhelming white room.

Whoa. I actually feel refreshed, thank heavens. Holy crow, I have to go meet his folks! He’s just worked me over with a riding crop and tied me up using a cable tie, for heavens sake, and I’m going to meet his parents. Well it will be Rose’s first time too, at least she'll be there for support. I roll my shoulders. They’re stiff. His demands for a personal trainer don’t seem so outlandish now… In fact, they’re mandatory if I am to have any hope of keeping up with him. I climb slowly out of bed and note that my dress is hanging outside the wardrobe and my bra is on the chair… where are my panties? I check beneath the chair, nothing. Then I remember – he squirreled them away in the pocket of his jeans. I flush at the memory… after he – I can’t even bring myself to think about it – he was so… barbarous. I frown. Why hasn’t he given me back my panties?

I steal quickly into the bathroom, puzzled, and enjoy a two-minute shower – far too brief – and while I’m drying myself I realize he’s done this on purpose. He wants me to be embarrassed and ask for my panties back, and he’ll either say yes or no. My inner goddess grins at me. *Hell, two can play that particular game.* I resolve there and then not to ask him. I’m not even going to mention them. And I shall go meet his parents sans underwear. *Isabella Swan!* my subconscious chides me, but I don’t want to listen to her – I almost hug myself with glee, because I know this will drive him crazy.

Back in the bedroom I put on my bra, slip into my dress, and climb into my shoes. Then glance down at the drink he’s left. Pale pink… what’s this? Cranberry and sparkling water… hmmm. It tastes delicious, and quenches my thirst.

Dashing back into the bathroom I check myself in the mirror – eyes bright, cheeks slightly flushed, slightly smug look because of my panty plan – and I head back downstairs. Fifteen minutes. Not bad Bella.

Edward is standing by the panoramic window, wearing the grey flannel pants that I love, the ones that hang in that unbelievably sexy way off his hips. And, of course, a white linen shirt. Doesn’t he have any other colors? Frank Sinatra sings softly over the surround sound speakers.

Edward turns and smiles as I enter. He looks at me expectantly.

“Hi,” I say softly and my sphinx-like smile meets his.

"Hi," he says. "How are you feeling?" His eyes are alight with amusement.

"Good, thanks. You?"

"I feel mighty fine Miss Swan."

He is so waiting for me to say something.

"Frank… I never figured you for a Sinatra fan."

He raises his eyebrows at me and looks at me speculatively.

"Eclectic taste Miss Swan," he murmurs, and strides toward me like a panther until he's standing in front of me, his gaze so intense it takes my breath away.

Frank starts crooning.

Those fingers in my hair

That sly come-hither stare

-

Edward leisurely traces his fingertips down my cheek, and I feel it all the way… down… *there.*.

"Dance with me," he murmurs, his voice husky.

That strips my conscience bare

It's witchcraft…

What?

Taking the remote out of his pocket, he turns up the volume and holds his hand out to me. His green gaze is full of promise and longing and humor. He is totally beguiling and I am bewitched. I place my hand in his. He grins lazily down at me and pulls me into his embrace, his arm curling around my waist, and he starts to sway.

-

And I've got no defense for it

The heat is too intense for it

What good would common sense for it do?

-

I put my free hand on his shoulder and grin up at him, caught in his infectious, playful mood. And he starts to move, boy can he dance, and we cover the floor, from the window to the kitchen and back again, whirling and turning. And he makes it so effortless for me to follow.

-

'*Cause it's witchcraft, wicked witchcraft,*

And although I know it's strictly taboo

When you arouse the need in me

My heart says yes indeed in me

Proceed with what you're leading me to

-

He guides me around the dining table, over to the piano, and backward and forward in front of the glass wall, Seattle twinkling outside, a dark and magical mural to our dance, and I can't help but laugh.

It's such an ancient pitch

But one I'd never switch

Cause there's no nicer witch than you…

He grins down at me.

"There's no nicer witch than you," he murmurs and he kisses me sweetly. "Well, that's brought some color to your cheeks Miss Swan. Thank you for the dance. Shall we go and meet my parents?"

"You're welcome and yes. I can't wait to meet them," I answer breathlessly.

"Do you have everything you need?"

"Oh yes," I respond sweetly.

“Are you sure?”

I nod, looking as nonchalant as I can manage under his intense, amused scrutiny.

His face splits into a huge grin and he shakes his head.

“Okay, if that’s the way you want to play it, Miss Swan.”

He grabs my hand, collects his jacket, which is hanging on one of the bar stools, and leads me through the foyer to the elevator. Oh, the many faces of Edward Cullen. Will I ever be able to understand this mercurial man?

Chapter 38

I peek up at Edward in the elevator. He's enjoying a private joke, a trace of a smile flirting with his beautiful mouth. I fear that it may be at my expense. What was I thinking? I'm going to see his parents and I'm not wearing any underwear. My subconscious gives me an unhelpful *I told you so* expression. In the relative safety of his apartment it seemed like a fun, teasing idea. Now, I'm almost outside. *With No Panties!* He peers down at me, and then it's there… the charge building between us. The amused look disappears from his face and his expression clouds, his eyes dark. *Oh my.*

The elevator doors open on the ground floor. Edward shakes his head slightly as if to clear his thoughts, and gestures for me to exit before him, in a most gentlemanly manner. Who's he kidding? He's no gentleman. He has my panties.

Taylor draws up in the large Mercedes. Edward opens the rear door for me and I climb inside as elegantly as I can, considering my state of wanton undress. I am grateful that Rose's plum dress is so clingy and hangs to the top of my knees.

We speed up the I-5, both of us quiet, no doubt inhibited by Taylor's steady presence in the front. Edward's mood is almost tangible, and seems to shift, the humor dissipating slowly as we head north. He's brooding, staring out of the window, and I can feel him slipping away from me. What is he thinking? I can't ask him. What can I say in front of Taylor?

"Where did you learn to dance?" I ask tentatively.

He turns to gaze at me, his eyes unreadable beneath the intermittent light of the passing street lamps.

"Do you really want to know?" he replies softly.

My heart sinks, and now I don't, because I can guess.

"Yes," I murmur, reluctantly.

"Mrs. Robinson was fond of dancing."

Oh. My worst suspicions confirmed. She has taught him well and the thought depresses me. There's nothing I can teach him. I have no special skills.

"She must have been a good teacher."

"She was," he says softly.

My scalp prickles. Did she have the best of him? Before he became so closed? Or did she bring him out of himself? He has such a fun, playful side. I smile involuntarily as I recall being in his arms as he spun me around his living room, so unexpected… and he has my panties, somewhere.

And then there's the Red Room of Pain. I rub my wrists reflexively – thin strips of plastic will do that to a girl. She taught him all that too, or ruined him, depending on one's point of view. Perhaps he would have found his way there anyway, in spite of Mrs. R. I realize, in that moment, that I hate her. I hope that I never meet her because I will not be responsible for my actions if I do. I can't remember ever feeling this passionately about anyone, especially someone I've never met. I gaze unseeing out of the window, nursing my irrational anger and jealousy.

My mind drifts back to the afternoon. Given what I understand of his preferences I think he's been easy on me. Would I do it again? I can't even pretend to put up an argument against that, of course I would if he asked me, and as long as he didn't hurt me. *If it's the only way to be with him*. And that's the bottom line. I want to be with him. My inner goddess sighs with relief. I come to the conclusion that she rarely uses her brain to think, just another vital part of her anatomy, and at the moment a rather exposed part.

"Don't," he murmurs.

I frown and turn to look at him. "Don't what?" I haven't touched him.

"Over-think things, Isabella." Reaching out he grasps my hand, draws it up to his lips, and kisses my knuckles gently. "I had a wonderful afternoon. Thank you."

And he's back with me again. I blink up at him and smile shyly. He's so confusing. I ask a question that's been bugging me…

"Why did you use a cable tie?"

He grins at me. "It's quick, it's easy and it's something different for you to feel and experience. I know they're quite brutal, and I do like that in a restraining device." He smiles at me mildly. "Very effective at keeping you in your place."

I flush and glance nervously at Taylor, who remains impassive, eyes on road. *What am I supposed to say to that?*

He shrugs at me innocently. "All part of my world, Isabella." He squeezes my hand and lets go, staring out of the window again.

His world indeed, and do I want to belong, on his terms? I just don't know. He hasn't mentioned that damned contract.

My inner musings do nothing to cheer me. I stare out of the window and the landscape has changed. We're crossing one of the bridges, surrounded by inky darkness. The somber night reflects my introspective mood, closing in, suffocating.

I glance briefly at Edward and he's staring at me.

"Penny for your thoughts?" he asks.

I sigh, and frown.

"That bad, huh?"

"I wish I knew what you were thinking."

He smirks at me. "Ditto, baby," he says softly as Taylor speeds into the night towards Bellevue.

It is just before eight when the Mercedes draws into the driveway of a colonial-style mansion. It's breathtaking, even down to the roses round the door. Picture-book perfect.

"Are you ready for this?" Edward asks as Taylor pulls up outside the impressive front door.

I nod, and he gives my hand another reassuring squeeze.

"First for me, too," he whispers and he smiles tentatively at me. "Bet you wish you were wearing your underwear right now," he teases and I flush. I'd forgotten my missing panties. Fortunately Taylor has climbed out of the car and is opening my door so he can't hear our exchange. I scowl at Edward who grins at me wickedly as I turn and climb out of the car.

Esme is on the doorstep, waiting for us. She looks elegantly sophisticated in a pale blue silk dress. Behind her stands Dr. Cullen, I presume… tall, blond, as handsome in his own way as Edward.

"Isabella, you've met my mother Esme. This is my dad, Carlisle."

"Doctor Cullen, what a pleasure to meet you." I smile and shake his outstretched hand.

"Oh, the pleasure is all mine Isabella."

"Please, call me Bella." His blue eyes are soft and gentle.

"Bella, how lovely to see you again." Esme wraps me in a warm hug. "Come in, my dear."

“Is she here?” I hear a screech from within the house.

I glance nervously at Edward.

“That would be Alice, my little sister,” he says almost irritably, but it doesn’t ring true – there’s an undercurrent of affection in his words. The way his voice grows softer and his eyes crinkle as he mentions her name. Edward obviously adores her. It’s a revelation. And she comes barreling down the hall… dark, elfin, impossibly slender and beautiful. She’s about my age.

“Isabella! I’ve heard so much about you.” She hugs me hard. *Holy crow*… and I can’t help but smile at her boundless enthusiasm.

“Bella, please,” I murmur as she drags me into the large vestibule. It's all dark wood floors and antique rugs, with a sweeping staircase to the second floor. “He’s never brought a woman home before,” says Alice, dark eyes bright with excitement. I glimpse Edward rolling his eyes and I raise an eyebrow at him.

He narrows his eyes back at me.

“Alice, calm down,” Esme admonishes softly. “Hello darling,” she says as she kisses Edward on both cheeks. He smiles down at her warmly, then shakes hands with his father.

We all turn and head into the living room. Alice has not let go of my hand. The room is spacious, tastefully furnished in creams, browns and pale blue… comfortable, understated and very stylish.

Rose and Emmett are cuddled together on a couch, clutching champagne flutes. Rose bounces up to embrace me and Alice finally releases my hand.

“Hi Bella!” she beams. “Edward,” she nods curtly to him.

“Rose.” He is equally formal back to her.

I frown at their exchange. Emmett grasps me in a bear hug. What is this, hug Bella week? This dazzling display of affection – I’m just not used to it. Edward stands at my side and puts his hand on my hip, spreading out his fingers and pulling me close, and they are all staring at us. It’s unnerving.

“Drinks?” Dr. Cullen seems to recover himself. “Prosecco?”

“Please,” Edward and I speak in unison. Oh, this is beyond weird.

Alice claps her hands. “You’re even saying the same things. I’ll get them.” She scoots out of the room. I think I flush scarlet, and seeing Rose sitting with Emmett, it occurs to me suddenly that the only reason Edward invited me is because Rose is here. Emmett probably freely and happily asked Rose to meet his parents. Edward was trapped – knowing that I would have found out via Rose. I frown at the thought. He’s been forced into the invitation. The realization is bleak and depressing. My subconscious nods sagely, a *you’ve-finally-worked-it-out-stupid* look on her face.

“Dinner’s almost ready,” Esme says and she follows Alice out of the room.

Edward frowns as he gazes at me.

“Sit,” he commands, pointing to the plush couch, and I do as I’m told, carefully crossing my legs. He sits down beside me but doesn’t touch me.

“We were just talking about vacations, Bella,” Dr. Cullen says kindly. “Emmett has decided to follow Rose and her family to Barbados for a week.”

I glance at Rose and she grins and nods at me, her eyes bright and wide. She's delighted. Rosalie Hale, show some dignity!

“Are you taking a break now you’ve finished your degree?” Dr. Cullen asks.

“I’m thinking about going to Florida for a few days,” I reply.

Edward turns and stares at me, blinking, his expression unreadable.

Oh shit.. I haven’t mentioned this to him.

“Florida?” he asks quietly.

“My mother lives there, and I haven’t seen her for a while.”

“When were you thinking of going?” His voice is low.

“Tomorrow, late evening.”

Alice saunters back into the living room, and hands us champagne flutes filled with pale pink prosecco.

“Your good health!” Dr. Cullen raises his glass. An appropriate toast from a doctor. It makes me smile.

“For how long?” Edward asks, his voice deceptively soft.

Holy crap… he's angry.

"I don't know yet. It will depend how my interviews go tomorrow."

His jaw clenches and Rose gets that look on her face. She smiles over-sweetly.

"Bella deserves a break," she says pointedly at Edward. Why is she so antagonistic towards him?

"You have interviews?" Dr. Cullen asks.

"Yes, for internships at two publishers, tomorrow."

"Well, I wish you the best of luck."

"Dinner is on the table," Esme announces.

We all stand, and Rose and Emmett follow Dr. Cullen and Alice out of the room. I go to follow and Edward clutches my hand, bringing me to an abrupt halt.

"When were you going to tell me you were leaving?" he says urgently. His tone is soft, but he's masking his anger.

"I'm not leaving, I'm going to see my mother… and I was only thinking about it."

"What about our arrangement?"

"We don't have an arrangement yet."

He narrows his eyes at me, then seems to remember himself. Releasing my hand, he takes my elbow and leads me out of the room.

"This conversation is not over," he whispers threateningly as we enter the dining room.

Oh crapola, don't get your panties in such a twist… *and give me back mine*. I glare at him.

The dining room reminds me of our private dinner at the Heathman. A crystal chandelier hangs over the dark wood table and there's a massive, ornately carved mirror on the wall. The table is laid and covered with a large linen table cloth, a bowl of pale pink peonies as the centre piece. It's quite stunning, and then I remember Edward mentioning that Esme was an interior designer.

As we take our places – Dr. Cullen at the head of the table with me on his right hand, and Edward seated beside me – the telephone rings.

“Excuse me.” Dr. Cullen rises again and exits.

Alice, seated beside Edward, grabs his hand and squeezes it tightly. He smiles warmly down at her.

“Where did you meet Bella?” she asks him.

“She interviewed me for the WSU student magazine.”

“Which Rose edits,” I add, hoping to steer the conversation away from me.

Alice beams at Rose, seated opposite me next to Emmett, and they start talking about the student magazine. I peek up at Edward and he turns to look at me, his head cocked to one side.

“What?” he asks.

“Please don’t be mad at me,” I whisper.

“I’m not mad at you…”

I stare at him. He sighs. “Yes, I am mad at you.” He closes his eyes briefly.

“Palm-twitchingly mad?” I ask nervously.

“What are you two talking about?” Rose interjects.

I flush and Edward glares at her, in a "butt-out-of-this-Hale" kind of way. Even Rose wilts slightly under his stare.

“Just about my trip to Florida,” I tell her sweetly, hoping to diffuse their mutual hostility.

Rose smiles, a wicked gleam in her eye. “How was Jake when you went to the bar with him on Friday?”

Holy fuck… Rose. I widen my eyes at her. What is she doing? She widens her eyes back at me, and I see she’s trying to make Edward jealous. *How little she knows.* I thought I had got away with this.

“He was fine,” I murmur.

Edward leans over to me. “Palm-twitchingly mad,” he whispers. “Especially now.” And his tone is quiet and deadly.

Oh no… I squirm. Emmett is suddenly standing beside me.

"Wine, Bella?"

"Yes, please..." *Lots!* He pours me a glass and moves on.

Esme reappears carrying two plates, followed by a pretty young woman with blond pigtails, dressed smartly in grey, carrying a tray of plates. Her eyes immediately find Edward in the room. She blushes and gazes at him from under her long mascara'd lashes. *What!*

"Thank you Heidi," Esme says gently. "Just leave the tray on the console."

Of course she's called Heidi, with those pigtails.

Heidi nods and with another quick, furtive glance at Edward she leaves.

So the Cullens have staff, and the staff are eyeing up *my* would-be Dominant. Can this evening get any worse? I scowl at my hands in my lap.

Dr. Cullen returns as Esme hands out the plates.

"Please start, everyone." She smiles down at me as she gives me a plate.

Chirozo and scallops, and in spite of the fact that my stomach is churning from Edward's veiled threats, the surreptitious glances from pretty little Miss Heidi – from Europe no doubt – and the debacle of my missing underwear, I am starving. I flush because I realise it's the physical effort of this afternoon that's given me such an appetite.

"Who was that, darling?" Esme asks Dr. Cullen.

"The hospital, another measles case."

"Oh no…"

"Yes, a child. The fourth case this month."

"I'm so glad the kids never went through that. They never caught anything worse than chicken pox, thank goodness… poor Emmett," she says as she sits down, smiling indulgently at the big man. He has his mouthful of his supper, but he still blushes.

"Edward and Alice were lucky. They got it so mildly, only a spot to share between them."

Now Edward and Emmett are both blushing. Alice giggles.

“So, did you catch the Mariners game, Dad?” Emmett’s clearly keen to move the conversation on.

The hors d’oeuvres are delicious and I concentrate on eating while Emmett, Dr. Cullen and Edward talk baseball. He seems relaxed and calm talking to his family. My mind is working furiously. Damn Rose, what game is she playing? Will he punish me? I quail at the thought. I haven’t signed that contract yet. Perhaps I won’t. Perhaps I’ll stay in Florida, where he can’t reach me.

“How are you settling into your new apartment dear?” Esme asks politely. I am grateful for her question, distracting me from my discordant thoughts, and I tell her about our move. As we finish our starters Heidi appears, and not for the first time I wish I felt able to put my hands freely on Edward, just to let her know. He may be 50 shades of fucked-up, but he’s mine. She proceeds to clear the table, brushing rather too closely to Edward for my liking. My inner goddess is smoldering, and not in a good way.

Rose and Alice are waxing lyrical about Paris.

“Have you been to Paris, Bella?” Alice asks innocently.

She distracts me from my jealous reverie.

“No, but I’d love to go.” And I know I’m the only one at the table who has never left mainland USA.

“We honeymooned in Paris.” Esme smiles at Dr. Cullen who grins back at her. It’s almost embarrassing to witness. They obviously love each other deeply and I wonder for a brief moment what it must be like to grow up with both one's parents in situ.

“It’s a beautiful city.” Alice agrees. “In spite of the Parisians. Edward, you should take Bella to Paris,” Alice states firmly.

“I think Isabella would prefer London,” Edward says softly.

Oh… he remembered. He places his hand on my knee, his fingers traveling up my thigh. My whole body tightens in response. *No… not here, not now.* I flush and shift trying to pull away from him. His hand clamps down on me, stilling me. I reach for my wine, in desperation.

Little Miss European Pigtails returns, all coy glances and swaying hips, with our entrée… lamb tagine with couscous. Fortunately she gives us our plates and then leaves, although she lingers over long handing Edward his. He looks quizzically at me as I watch her close the dining room door.

“So what was wrong with the Parisians?” Emmett asks his sister. “Didn’t they take to your winsome ways?”

“Ugh… no they didn’t. And Monsieur Demetri, the ogre I was working for, he was such a domineering tyrant.”

I splutter into my wine.

“Isabella?” Edward asks solicitously, taking his hand off my knee. Humor has returned to his voice. Oh, thank heavens.

When I nod he pats my back gently, and only removes his hand when he knows I’ve recovered.

The lamb is succulent and delicately spiced. It is even more palatable since Edward manages to retain his good-humor for the rest of the meal. I suspect that’s because I’m eating so heartily. The conversation flows freely among the Cullens, warm and caring, gently teasing each other. Over lemon syllabub dessert, Alice regales us with her exploits in Paris, lapsing at one point into fluent French. We all stare at her, and she stares back puzzled, until Edward tells her in equally fluent French what she’s done, whereupon she bursts into a fit of giggles. She has a very infectious laugh and soon we’re all in stitches.

Emmett holds forth about his latest building project, a new eco-friendly community to the north of Seattle. I glance up at Rose and she’s hanging on every word Emmett says, her eyes glowing with lust, or love, I haven’t quite worked out which yet. He grins down at her, and it’s as if an unspoken promise passes between them. *Laters baby,* he’s saying, and it’s hot… freaking hot. I flush just watching them.

I sigh, and peek up at Fifty Shades. He’s so beautiful, I could stare at him forever. He has a light stubble over his chin and my fingers itch to scratch it, feel it against my face, against my breasts… between my thighs. I blush at the direction of my thoughts.

He peers down at me and raises his hand to pull at my chin.

“Don’t bite your lip,” he murmurs huskily. “I want to do that.”

Esme and Alice clear our dessert glasses and head to the kitchen while Dr. Cullen, Rose, and Emmett discuss the merits of solar panels in Washington State. Edward, feigning interest in their conversation, puts his hand once more on my knee, and his fingers travel up my thigh. My breathing hitches and I press my thighs together in a bid to halt his progress. I can see him smirk.

“Shall I give you a tour of the backyard?” he asks me, quite openly.

And I know I'm meant to say yes, but I don't trust him. Before I can answer, he's on his feet and holding his hand out to me. I place my hand in his and I feel all the muscles clench deep in my belly. I'm responding to his dark, hungry green gaze.

"Excuse me," I say to Dr. Cullen and I follow Edward out of the dining room.

He leads me through the hallway and into the kitchen where Alice and Esme are stacking the dishwasher. European Pigtails is nowhere to be seen.

"I'm going to show Isabella the backyard," Edward says innocently to his mother.

She waves us out with a smile as Alice heads back to the dining room.

We step out on to a grey flagstone patio area, lit by recessed lights in the flagstones. There are shrubs in grey stone tubs, and a chic metal table and chairs set up in one corner. Edward walks past those, up some steps, and onto a vast lawned area that leads down to the bay. Oh my – it's beautiful. Seattle twinkles on the horizon and the cool bright May moon etches a sparkling silver path across the water towards a jetty where two boats are moored. Beside the jetty stands a boathouse. It is so picturesque... so peaceful. I stand and gape for a moment.

Edward pulls me behind him and my heels sink into the soft grass.

"Stop, please." I am stumbling in his wake.

He stops and gazes at me, his expression unfathomable.

"My heels. I need to take my shoes off."

"Don't bother," he says and he bends down and scoops me over his shoulder. I squeal loudly with shocked surprise and he gives me a ringing slap on my behind.

"Keep your voice down," he growls.

Oh no… this is not good, my subconscious is quaking at the knees. He's mad about something, could be Jake, Florida…. No panties, biting my lip… Jeez, he's easy to rile.

"Where are we going?" I breathe.

"Boathouse," he snaps.

I hang on to his hips as I'm tipped upside-down and he strides purposefully in the moonlight across the lawn.

“Why?” I sound breathless, bouncing on this shoulder.

“I need to be alone with you.”

“What for?”

“Because I’m going to spank you and then fuck you.”

“Why?” I whimper softly.

“You know why,” he hisses.

“I thought you were an in-the-moment guy?” I plead breathlessly.

“Isabella, I’m in the moment… trust me.”

Holy fuck.

Chapter 39

Edward bursts through the wooden door of the boathouse, and pauses to flick on some lights. Fluorescents ping and buzz in sequence as harsh white light floods the large wooden building. From my upside-down view I can see an impressive launch of some kind in the dock, floating gently on the dark water, but I only get a brief look before he's carrying me up some wooden stairs to the room above.

He pauses at the doorway and touches another switch – halogens this time, softer, on a dimmer – and we're in an attic room with sloping ceilings. A nautical New England theme, blues and creams with a dash of red, sparse furnishings – a couple of couches is all I can see. Edward sets me on my feet on the wooden floor. I don't have time to examine my surroundings, my eyes can't leave him, I am hypnotized – watching him like one would watch a rare and dangerous predator – waiting for him to strike. His breathing is harsh. Well, he's just hefted me across the lawn and up a flight of stairs. His green eyes blaze at me with longing, need and pure unadulterated lust.

Holy shit. I could spontaneously combust from his look alone.

"Please don't hit me," I whisper, pleading.

And his brow furrows slightly, his eyes widening. He blinks twice.

"I don't want you to spank me, not here, not now. Please don't."

His mouth drops open slightly in surprise, and beyond brave, I tentatively reach up and run my fingers down his cheek to the stubble on his chin. It's a curious mixture of soft and prickly. He slowly closes his eyes and leans his face into my touch and I can hear his breath hitch in his throat. Reaching up with my other hand, I run my fingers into his hair. Oh – I love his hair. His soft moan is barely audible, and when he opens his eyes, his look is – wary, like he doesn't understand what I'm doing. Stepping forward, so I am flush against him, I pull gently on his hair bringing his mouth down to mine and I kiss him. Forcing my tongue between his lips and into his mouth, he groans and his arms come up around me, pulling me to him, his hands finding their way into my hair and he's kissing me back hard, possessive, his tongue and my tongue twisting and tasting together, consuming each other. He tastes divine.

He pulls back suddenly, our collective breathing ragged and mingling. My hands drop to his arms and he glares down at me.

"What are you doing to me?" he whispers and I hear his confusion.

"Kissing you."

"You said no."

"What?" *Where is he going with this… no to what?*

"At the dinner table, with your legs."

Oh, that's what this is all about.

"But we were at your parents' dining table." I stare up at him, completely bewildered.

"No one's ever said no to me before. And it's so – hot." His eyes widen slightly and I can see wonder and lust, a heady mix. I swallow instinctively.

His hand moves down to my behind. He pulls me sharply against him and I can feel his erection.

Oh… my…

"You're mad and turned on because I said no?" I breathe, astonished.

"I'm mad because you never mentioned Florida to me. I'm mad because you went drinking with that guy who tried to seduce you when you were drunk and who left you when you were ill with an almost complete stranger. What kind of friend does that? And I'm mad and aroused because you closed your legs on me." His eyes glitter dangerously, and he's slowly inching up the hem of my dress. "I want you and I want you now. And if you're not going to let me spank you – which you deserve – I'm going to fuck you on the couch this minute, quickly, for my pleasure, not yours."

My dress is now barely covering my naked behind. And he moves suddenly so that his hand is cupping my sex and one of his fingers sinks slowly into me. His other arm holds me firmly in place around my waist.

"This is mine," he whispers aggressively. "All mine. Do you understand?" He eases his finger in and out, as he gazes down at me, gauging my reaction, his eyes burning.

"Yes… yours," I breathe, as my desire, hot and heavy surges through my bloodstream affecting everything – nerve endings, breathing, my heart pounding - trying to leave my chest, blood thrumming in my ears. Oh my.

Abruptly he moves, doing several things at once. Withdrawing his fingers, leaving me wanting, unzipping his flies and pushing me down onto the couch so he's on lying on top of me.

“Hands on your head,” he commands harshly as he kneels up, forcing my legs wider and reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket. He takes out a foil packet, gazing down at me the whole time, his expression dark. He shrugs out of his jacket so it falls on the floor and he rolls the condom down over his impressive length.

I do as I’m told, hands on my head, and I know it's so I won’t touch him. I’m so turned on. I feel my hips moving already, up to meet him, wanting him inside me, like this, rough and hard. Oh… the anticipation…

“We don’t have long. This will be quick and it’s for me, not you. Do you understand? Don’t come or I will spank you,” he says through clenched teeth.

Holy crap… how do I stop?

And with one swift thrust he’s inside me, to the hilt. I groan loudly, gutturally, and revel in the fullness of his possession. He puts his hands on top of mine on my head, his elbows holding my arms out and down, his legs pinioning me. I am trapped. It’s like he’s everywhere, overwhelming me, almost suffocating. But it’s heavenly. This is my power, this is what I do to him and it’s a hedonistic, triumphant feeling. He moves quickly and furiously inside me, his breathing harsh at my ear and I can feel my body responding… no… no. And I’m meeting him thrust for thrust, a perfect counterpoint. Abruptly, and all too soon, he rams into me and stills as he finds his release, air hissing through his teeth. He relaxes momentarily so I feel his entire, delicious weight on me. But I’m not ready to let him go… my body craving relief, but he’s so heavy in that moment I can’t push against him. Then all of a sudden he withdraws, leaving me aching and hungry for more. He glares down at me.

“Don’t touch yourself. I want you frustrated. That’s what you do to me, by not talking to me, by denying me what’s mine.” His eyes blaze anew, angry again.

I nod, panting up at him. He stands and removes the condom, knotting it at the end, and puts it in his pants pocket. I gaze at him, my breathing still erratic, and involuntarily I squeeze my thighs together, trying to find some relief. Edward does up his flies and runs his hand through his hair as he reaches down to collect his jacket. He turns back to gaze down at me, his expression softer.

“We’d better get back to the house.”

I sit up, a little unsteadily, dazed.

“Here, you may put these on.” And from his inside pocket he produces my panties. I don’t grin as I take them from him but inside I know – I’ve taken a punishment fuck but gained a small victory over the panties. My inner goddess nods in agreement a satisfied grin over her face. *You didn’t have to ask for them.*

“EDWARD!” Alice shouts from the floor below.

He turns and raises his eyebrows at me.

“In the nick of time. For someone so small, she can be really irritating.”

I scowl back at him, hastily restore my panties to their rightful place, and stand with as much dignity as I can muster in my just-fucked state. Quickly, I attempt to smooth my just-fucked hair.

“Up here, Alice,” he calls down. “Well Miss Swan, I feel better for that – but I still want to spank you,” he says softly.

“Well, I don’t believe I deserve it Mr. Cullen, especially after tolerating your unprovoked attack.”

“Unprovoked? You kissed me,” he says and tries his best to look wounded.

I purse my lips at him.

“It was attack as the best form of defense.”

“Defense against what?”

“You and your twitchy palm.”

He cocks his head to one side and smiles at me as Alice comes clattering up the stairs.

“But it was tolerable?” he asks softly.

I flush. “Barely,” I whisper, but I can’t help my smirk.

“Oh, there you are...” She beams at us.

“I was showing Isabella around.” Edward holds his hand out to me, his green eyes intense. Tentatively I put my hand into his, and he gives it a soft squeeze.

“Rose and Emmett are about to leave. Can you believe those two? They can’t keep their hands off each other.” Alice feigns disgust and looks from Edward to me. “What have you been doing in here?”

Jeez, she’s forward. I blush scarlet and she grins at me.

"Showing Isabella my rowing trophies," Edward says without missing a beat, completely poker-faced. "Let's go say goodbye to Rose and Emmett."

Rowing trophies?

He pulls me gently in front of him and as Alice turns to go he swats my behind.

I gasp in surprise.

"I will do it again, Isabella and soon," he threatens quietly, close to my ear, then he pulls me into an embrace, my back to his front, and softly kisses my hair.

Back in the house Rose and Emmett are making their farewells to Esme and Dr. Cullen.

Rose hugs me hard.

"I need to speak to you about antagonising Edward," I hiss quietly in her ear as she embraces me.

"He needs antagonising, then you can see what he's really like. Be careful Bella, he's so controlling," she whispers. "See you later."

I KNOW WHAT'S HE'S REALLY LIKE – YOU DON'T! – I scream at her in my head. I'm fully aware that her actions come from a good place, but sometimes she just oversteps the mark, so far that she's into the neighboring state. I scowl at her and childishly she pokes her tongue out at me, and I smile at her, resigned. Playful Rose is novel, must be Emmett's influence.

We wave them off at the doorway, and Edward turns to me.

"We should go too – you have interviews tomorrow."

Alice embraces me warmly as we make our goodbyes. "We never thought he'd find anyone!" she gushes.

I flush and Edward rolls his eyes again. I purse my lips at him. Why can he do that when I can't? I want to roll my eyes back at him but I daren't, after his threat in the boathouse.

"Take care of yourself, Bella dear," Esme says kindly.

Edward, embarrassed or frustrated by the lavish attention I'm receiving from the remaining Cullens, grabs my hand and pulls me to his side.

“Well let’s not frighten her away or spoil her with too much affection,” he grumbles.

“Oh Edward, stop teasing.” Esme scolds him indulgently, her eyes glowing with love and affection for him. Somehow I don’t think he’s teasing. I surreptitiously watch their interaction. It’s obvious Esme adores him, with a mother's unconditional love. He bends and kisses her stiffly.

“Mom,” he says and there’s an undercurrent in his voice… reverence maybe?

“Dr. Cullen – goodbye and thank you.” I hold out my hand to him, and he hugs me too!

“Please, call me Carlisle. I do hope we see you again, very soon, Bella.”

Our farewells said, Edward leads me to the car where Taylor is waiting. *Has he been waiting here the whole time?* Taylor opens the door for me and I slide into the back of the Mercedes.

I feel some of the tension leaving my shoulders. Jeez what a day. I am beyond tired. After a brief conversation with Taylor, Edward clambers into the car beside me. He turns to face me.

“Well, it seems my family likes you too,” he murmurs.

Too? The depressing thought about how I came to be invited pops unbidden and very unwelcome into my head. Taylor starts the car and heads away from the circle of light in the driveway to the darkness of the road. I gaze at Edward and he's staring at me.

"What?" he asks, his voice quiet.

I flounder momentarily. No - I'll tell him. He's always complaining that I don't talk to him. “I think that you felt trapped into bringing me to meet your parents.” My voice is soft and hesitant. “If Emmett hadn’t asked Rose, you’d never have asked me.” I can’t see his face in the light but he tilts his head, gaping at me.

“Isabella, I’m delighted that you’ve met my parents. Why are you so filled with self-doubt? It never ceases to amaze me. You’re such a strong, self-contained young woman, but you have such negative thoughts about yourself. If I hadn’t wanted you to meet them, you wouldn’t be here. Is that how you were feeling the whole time you were there?”

Oh! He wanted me there – and it’s a revelation. He doesn’t seem uncomfortable answering me, as he would if he were hiding the truth. He seems genuinely pleased that I’m here. A warm glow spreads slowly through my veins. He shakes his head and reaches for my hand. I glance nervously at Taylor.

"Don't worry about Taylor. Talk to me."

I shrug. "Yes, I thought that. And another thing… I only mentioned Florida because Rose was talking about Barbados. I haven't made up my mind."

"Do you want to go and see your mother?"

"Yes."

He looks… oddly at me, like he's having some internal struggle. "Can I come with you?" he asks eventually.

What!?

"Erm… I don't think that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Well, I was hoping for a break, from all this intensity. To try and think things through."

He stares at me. "I'm too intense?"

And I can't help it – I burst out laughing. "That's putting it mildly!"

In the light of the passing street lamps I see his lips quirk up. "Are you laughing at me Miss Swan?"

"I wouldn't dare, Mr. Cullen," I reply with mock seriousness.

"I think you dare, and I think you do laugh at me, frequently."

"Well, you are quite funny."

"Funny?"

"Oh yes."

"Funny peculiar or funny ha ha?"

"Oh… a lot of one and some of the other."

"Which way round?"

"I'll leave you to figure that out."

"I'm not sure if I can figure anything out around you, Isabella," he says sardonically… then continues, quietly, "What do you need to think about in Florida?"

"Us," I whisper.

He stares at me, impassive. "You said you'd try," he murmurs.

"I know."

"Are you having second thoughts?"

"Possibly…"

He shifts as if uncomfortable. "Why?"

Holy crap… how did this suddenly become such an intense and meaningful conversation? It's like it's been sprung on me. Like an exam and I'm not prepared – what do I say? Because I think I love you, and you just see me as a toy… Because I can't touch you… Because I'm too frightened to show you any affection in case you flinch or tell me off, or worse, beat me? What can I say?

I stare momentarily out of the window. The car is heading back across the bridge. We are both shrouded in darkness, masking our thoughts and feelings, but we don't need the night for that…

"Why, Isabella?" Edward presses me for an answer.

I shrug, trapped. I don't want to lose him. In spite of all his demands, his need to control, his scary vices, I have never felt as alive as I do now. It's a thrill to be sitting here beside him. He's so unpredictable, sexy, smart, funny. But his moods, oh – and he wants to hurt me. He says he'll think about my reservations, but it still scares me. I close my eyes. What can I say? Deep down I would just like more. More affection, more playful Edward, more… love.

He squeezes my hand.

"Talk to me Isabella. I don't want to lose you. This last week…" he trails off.

We're coming near to the end of the bridge and the road is once more bathed in the neon light of the street lamps. His face is intermittently in the light and the dark. And it's such a fitting metaphor. This man, whom I once thought of as a romantic hero – a brave shining white knight, or the dark knight as he said – he's not a hero. He's a man with serious, deep emotional flaws and he's dragging me into the dark. Can I not guide him into the light?

“I still want more,” I whisper.

“I know,” he says. “I’ll try.”

I blink up at him and he relinquishes my hand and pulls at my chin, releasing my trapped lip.

“For you Isabella, I will try.” He’s radiating sincerity. Oh my…

And that’s my cue. I unbuckle my seatbelt, reach across and clamber into his lap, taking him completely by surprise. Wrapping my arms around his head I kiss him, long and hard, and in a nanosecond he’s responding.

“Stay with me, tonight,” he breathes. “If you go away, I won’t see you all week. Please.”

“Yes,” I acquiesce. "And I'll try too. I'll sign your contract." And it's a spur of the moment decision.

He gazes down at me. "Sign after Florida. Think about it. Think about it hard baby." And his hands cup my face and he kisses me again, tenderly.

Chapter 40

"You really should wear your seatbelt," Edward whispers disapprovingly, into my hair, but he makes no move to shift me from his lap. I nuzzle up against him, eyes closed, my nose at his throat, drinking in his sexy Edward-and-spiced-musky body-wash fragrance, my head on his shoulder. I let my mind drift and I allow myself to fantasize that he loves me. Oh, and it's so real, tangible almost, and a small part of my nasty harpy self-conscious acts completely out of character and *dares to hope.* I'm careful not to touch his chest but just snuggle in his arms as he holds me tightly.

All too soon I'm torn from my impossible daydream.

"We're home," Edward murmurs and it's such a tantalizing sentence, full of so much potential. *Home, with Edward…* Except his apartment is an art gallery, not a home.

Taylor opens the door for us and I thank him shyly, aware that he's been within earshot of our conversation, but his kind smile is reassuring and gives nothing away. Once out of the car, Edward assesses me critically. *Oh no… what have I done now?*

"Why don't you have a jacket?" He frowns as he shrugs out of his and drapes it over my shoulders. Relief washes through me.

"It's in the Volvo," I reply sleepily, yawning.

He smirks at me. "Tired, Miss Swan?"

"Yes, Mr. Cullen." And suddenly, I feel bashful under his teasing scrutiny. Nevertheless, I feel an explanation is in order, "I've been prevailed upon in ways I never thought possible today."

"Well, if you're really unlucky, I may prevail upon you some more," he promises, as he takes my hand and leads me into the building, while Taylor drives off toward the garage. *Holy Crow… Again?!*

I gaze up at him in the elevator. I have assumed he'd like me to sleep with him, and then I remember that he doesn't sleep with anyone, although he has with me a few times. I frown, and abruptly his gaze darkens. He reaches up and grasps my chin.

"One day I will fuck you in this elevator, Isabella, but right now you're tired – so I think we should stick to a bed." Bending down, he gently clamps his teeth around my lower lip and pulls gently. I melt against him and my breathing stops, as my insides unfurl with longing. I reciprocate, fastening my teeth over his top lip, teasing him, and he groans. When the

elevator doors open he grabs my hand and tugs me into the foyer, through the double doors and into the hallway.

"Do you need a drink or anything?"

"No…"

"Good. Let's go to bed."

I raise my eyebrows at him.

"You're going to settle for plain old vanilla?"

He cocks his head to one side.

"Nothing plain or old about vanilla – it's a very intriguing flavor," he breathes.

"Since when?"

"Since last Saturday. Why? Were you hoping for something more exotic?"

My inner goddess pops her head above the parapet.

"Oh no… I've had enough exotic for one day." My inner goddess pouts at me, failing miserably to hide her disappointment.

"Sure? We cater for all tastes here – at least 31 flavors." And he grins at me lasciviously.

"I've noticed," I reply dryly.

He shakes his head. "Come on, Miss Swan, you have a big day tomorrow. Sooner you're in bed, sooner you'll be fucked and sooner you can sleep."

"Mr. Cullen, you are a born romantic."

"Miss Swan, you have a smart mouth. I may have to subdue it some way. Come." He leads me down the hallway into his bedroom and kicks the door closed.

"Hands in the air," he commands. I oblige, and in one breathtakingly swift move he removes my dress, like a magician, grasping it at the hem and pulling it smoothly and fleetly over my head.

"Ta Da!" he says playfully.

I giggle and applaud politely. He bows gracefully grinning. *How can I resist him when he's like this?* He places my dress on the lone chair beside his chest of drawers.

"And for your next trick?" I prompt, teasing.

"Oh my dear Miss Swan. Get into my bed," he growls. "And I'll show you."

"Do you think that for once I should play hard to get?" I ask coquettishly.

His eyes widen with surprise and I can see a glimmer of excitement.

"Well… the door's closed. Not sure how you're going to avoid me," he says sardonically. "I think it's a done deal."

"But I'm a good negotiator."

"So am I." He stares down at me, but as he does his expression changes, and I can feel the confusion that washes over him and the atmosphere in the room shifts abruptly, tensing.

"Don't you want to fuck?" he asks.

"No…" I breathe.

"Oh." He frowns.

Okay here goes… deep breath.

"I want you to make love to me."

He stills and stares at me blankly. His expression darkens. Oh shit, this doesn't look good. *Give him a minute!* my subconscious snaps.

"Bella, I…" He runs his hands through his hair. Two hands… Jeez, he's really bewildered.

"I thought we did?" he says eventually.

"I want to touch you."

He takes an involuntary step back from me, his expression for a moment… fearful, and then he reins it in.

"Please," I whisper.

He seems to recover himself.

"Oh, no Miss Swan… you've had enough concessions from me this evening. And I'm saying no."

"No?"

"No."

Oh… I can't argue with that… can I?

"Look, you're tired, I'm tired. Let's just go to bed," he says, watching me carefully.

"So touching is a hard limit for you?"

"Yes. This is old news."

"Please tell me why."

"Oh, Isabella please… Just drop it for now," he mutters exasperated.

"It's important to me."

Again he runs both hands through his hair, and he utters an oath beneath his breath. Turning on his heel, he heads for the chest of drawers, pulls out a t-shirt and throws it at me. I catch it, bemused.

"Put that on and get into bed," he snaps.

I frown but decide to humor him. He sounds irritated. Turning my back, I quickly remove my bra, pulling the t-shirt on as hastily as I can to cover my nakedness. I leave my panties on. I haven't worn them for most of the evening.

"I need the bathroom." My voice is a whisper.

He frowns at me, bemused. "Now you're asking permission?"

"Err… no."

"Isabella, you know where the bathroom is. Today, at this point in our strange arrangement, you don't need my permission to use it." He sounds really irritated.

He shrugs out of his shirt and I scoot quickly into the ensuite.

I stare at myself in the over-large mirror. *What are you doing?* Touching is his hard limit. *Too soon, you idiot, he needs to walk before he can run*. My subconscious is furious,

medusa-like in her anger, hair flying, her hands clenched around her face like Edvard Munch's Scream. No. No. No! I ignore my subconscious, but she won't climb back into her box… *You are making him mad. Think about all that's he's said, all he's conceded*… But I need this one thing. I need to be able to show him affection, then perhaps he can reciprocate…

I'm shocked that I still look the same in the mirror. After all that I've done today, still the same ordinary girl looking back at me. *What did you expect, that you'd grow horns and a little pointy tail?* my subconscious snaps at me. I shake my head and grasp Edward's toothbrush. Go away! She's right of course… I'm rushing him. He's not ready, nowhere near, and neither am I. We are balanced on the delicate see-saw that is our strange arrangement – at different ends, vacillating, and it tips and sways between us. We need to both edge closer to the middle to stabilize it. I just hope neither one of us becomes so unbalanced that we both fall.

I've used his toothbrush before, back at the Heathman. It seems so long ago but it was what, just over a week? This is all too quick. Florida seems more appealing than ever. As I begin brushing my teeth, he knocks.

"Come in," I splutter through a cloud of toothpaste.

Edward stands in the doorway, his pjs hanging off his hips – in that way… that makes every little cell in my body stand up and take notice. He's bare-chested, and I drink him in, like I'm crazed with thirst and he's clear cool mountain spring water. Oh my. He gazes at me impassively, then he smirks and comes to stand beside me. Our eyes lock in the mirror, green to brown. I finish with his toothbrush, rinse it off and hand it to him, my look never leaving his. Wordlessly, he takes the toothbrush from me and puts it in his mouth. I smirk back at him, and his eyes are suddenly dancing with humor.

"Do feel free to borrow my toothbrush," he says, his tone gently mocking.

"Thank you, sir." I smile sweetly and I leave him to it, heading back to bed.

A few minutes later he's back.

"You know this is not how I saw tonight panning out," he mutters.

"Imagine if I said to you that you couldn't touch me."

He clambers onto the bed and sits cross-legged. "Isabella, I've told you, fifty shades. I had a rough start in life – you don't want that shit in your head. Why would you?"

"Because I want to know you better."

"You know me well enough."

"How can you say that?" I struggle up onto my knees, facing him.

He rolls his eyes at me, frustrated.

"You're rolling your eyes. Last time I did that I ended up over your knee."

"Oh, I'd like to put you there again."

Inspiration hits me.

"Tell me and you can."

"What?"

"You heard me."

"You're bargaining with me?" I can hear the adamant disbelief in his voice.

I nod. *Yes… this is the way. "Negotiating."*

"It doesn't work that way, Isabella."

"Okay, tell me and I'll roll my eyes at you."

He laughs, and I get a rare glimpse of carefree Edward… I've not seen him for a while. He sobers. "Always so keen, so eager for information." He gazes at me, green eyes blazing with a wild excitement. After a moment, still eyeing me speculatively, he gracefully climbs off the bed.

"Don't go away," he says and exits the room. Trepidation lances through me, and I hug myself. Some evil plan no doubt and part of me sincerely wishes this was so… Shit, supposing he returns with a cane, or some weird kinky implement? Holy shit, what will I do then? When he does return, he's holding something small in his hands. I can't actually see what it is and I'm burning with curiosity.

"When's your first interview tomorrow?" he asks softly.

"Two."

His slow wicked grin spreads across his face. "Good." And before my eyes he subtly changes. Harder, intractable, hot. This is Dominant Edward.

“Get off the bed. Stand over here.” He points to beside the bed and I scramble up and off it in double-quick time. He stares intently down at me, his eyes glittering with promise.

“Trust me?” he asks softly.

I nod. He holds out his hand, and in his palm are two round, shiny silver balls, linked with a thick black thread.

“These are new,” he says emphatically.

I look questioningly up at him.

“I am going to put these inside you, and then I’m going to spank you, not for punishment, but for your pleasure, and mine.” He pauses, gauging my wide-eyed reaction.

Inside me! I gasp and all the muscles deep in my belly clench. My inner goddess is doing the dance of the seven veils.

“Then we’ll fuck and, if you’re still awake, I’ll impart some information about my formative years. Agreed?”

He’s asking my permission! Breathlessly I nod. I’m incapable of speech.

“Good girl. Open your mouth.”

Mouth?

“Wider.”

Very gently, he puts the balls in my mouth.

“Suck. They need lubrication,” he commands.

They are cold, smooth, surprisingly heavy and metallic tasting. My dry mouth pools with saliva as my tongue explores the unfamiliar objects. Edward’s green gaze does not leave mine. Holy crow this is... turning me on. I squirm slightly.

“Keep still, Isabella,” he warns.

“Stop.” He gently pulls them from my mouth.

Moving toward the bed he throws the duvet aside and sits down on the edge.

“Come here.”

I stand in front of him.

"Now, turn around, bend down, and grasp your ankles."

I blink at him and his expression darkens.

"Don't hesitate," he admonishes me softly, an undercurrent in his voice, and he pops the balls in his mouth.

Fuck this is sexier than the toothbrush.

I follow his orders immediately. Jeez… can I touch my ankles? I find I can, with ease. The t-shirt slides up my back exposing my behind. Thank heavens I have retained my panties, but I suspect I won't for long.

He places his hand reverently on my backside and very softly caresses it with his whole hand. With my eyes open I can see his legs, through mine… nothing else. I close my eyes tightly as he gently moves my panties to the side and slowly runs his finger up and down my sex. My body braces itself, a heady mix of wild anticipation and arousal. He slides one finger inside me and he circles it deliciously slowly. Oh, it feels good. I moan.

His breathing halts, and I hear him gasp, as he repeats the motion. He withdraws his finger and very slowly inserts the balls, one slow, delicious ball at a time. Oh my. They're body temperature, warmed by our collective mouths. It's a curious feeling. Once they're inside me I can't really feel them, but then again, I know they're *there*.

He straightens my panties and leans forward, and I feel his lips very softly kiss my behind.

"Stand up," he orders, and shakily, I get to my feet. Oh! Now I can feel them. He grasps my hips to steady me while I re-establish my equilibrium.

"You okay?" he asks, his voice stern.

"Yes." My answer is feather soft.

"Turn around."

I turn and face him… the balls shift. The movement startles me, but not in a bad way.

"How does that feel?" he asks.

"Strange."

"Strange good or strange bad?"

“Strange good,” I confess, blushing.

“Good.” I can see a trace of humor lurking in his eyes.

“I want a glass of water. Go and fetch one for me please.”

Oh...

“And when you come back, I shall put you across my knee. Think about that, Isabella.”

Water… He wants water – now – why?

As I leave the bedroom, it becomes abundantly clear why… he wants me to walk around. As I do, the balls move inside me, pressing against me, massaging me internally. Oh… wow. It’s such a weird feeling and not entirely unpleasant. In fact, my breathing accelerates as I stretch up for a glass from the kitchen cabinet, and I gasp. Oh my… I may have to keep these.

He’s watching me carefully when I return.

“Thank you,” he says as he takes the glass from me.

Very slowly he takes a sip, then places the glass on his bedside table. I can see a foil packet, ready, waiting… like me. And I know he’s doing this to build the anticipation. My heart has picked up a beat. He turns his bright green gaze to mine.

“Come. Stand beside me. Like last time.”

I sidle up to him, my blood thrumming through my body, and this time… I’m excited. Aroused.

“Ask me,” he says softly.

I frown… ask him what?

“Ask me,” his voice is slightly harder.

What? How was your water? What does he want?

“Ask me, Isabella. I won’t say it again.” And there’s such a threat implicit in his words, and it dawns on me. He wants me to ask him to spank me. Holy shit. He’s looking at me expectantly, his eyes growing colder… *shit.*

“Spank me, please, sir,” I whisper.

He closes his eyes momentarily, savoring my words. Reaching up, he grasps my left hand and he tugs me over his knees. I fall instantly, and he steadies me as I land in his lap. My heart is in my mouth. His hand gently strokes my behind. I'm angled across his lap again so that my torso rests on the bed beside him. This time he doesn't throw his leg over mine, but smooths my hair out of my face and tucks it behind my ear. Once he's done, he clasps my hair at the nape to hold me in place. He pulls slightly and my head shifts back.

"I want to see your face while I spank you, Isabella," he murmurs, all the while softly rubbing my backside. His hand moves down, between the cheeks of my behind and he pushes against my sex and the balls inside me move. Oh, the sensation is exquisite. I moan.

"This is for pleasure, Isabella. Mine and yours," he whispers softly.

He lifts his hand and brings it down in a resounding slap against the junction of my thighs, my ass, and my sex. The balls move forward inside me and I'm lost in a quagmire of sensation. The stinging across my behind, the fullness of the balls inside me and the fact that he's holding me down. I screw my face up as my faculties attempt to absorb all these foreign feelings. I note somewhere in my brain that he's not smacked me as hard as last time. He caresses my backside again, trailing his palm across my skin and over my underwear. *Why's he not removed my panties?* Then his palm disappears and he brings it down again. I groan as the sensation spreads and he starts a pattern… left to right and then down. The down ones are the best. Everything moving forward, inside me, the heavy metallic balls. Oh my, and in between each smack he caresses me, kneads me, so I am massaged inside and out. It's such a stimulating, erotic feeling and for some reason, because this is on my terms I don't mind the pain, it's not painful as such. Well, it is, but not unbearable. Somehow manageable, and yes pleasurable even. Yes, I groan. I can do this. And then he pauses as slowly, he peels my panties down my legs. I writhe on his legs, not because I want to escape the blows, but I want… more… release… something. His touch against my sensitized skin, all sensuous tingle, it's overwhelming, and he starts again, a few soft slaps, then building up, left to right and down. Oh, the downs… I groan.

"Good girl, Isabella," he groans and his breathing is ragged.

He spanks me twice more and then he pulls at the small threads attached to the balls and he jerks them out of me suddenly. I almost climax – the feeling is out of this world. Moving swiftly, he gently turns me over. I hear rather than see the rip of the foil packet and then he's lying beside me. He seizes my hands, hoists them over my head, and eases himself onto me… into me… sliding slowly, filling me, where the silver globes have been. I groan loudly.

"Oh, baby," he whispers, as he moves back, forwards, a slow sensual tempo… savoring me… feeling me. It is the most gentle he has ever been, and it takes no time at all for me to fall over the edge, spiraling into a delicious, violent, exhausting, orgasm.

And as I come around him, it ignites his release and he slides into me, stilling, gasping out my name, in desperate wonder.

"*Bella!"*

And when he's silent and panting on top of me, his hands still entwined in mine above my head, he leans back and stares down at me.

"I enjoyed that," he whispers and kisses me so sweetly.

He doesn't linger for more sweet kisses as I would like, but rises, covers me with the duvet and disappears into the bathroom. On his return, he's carrying a bottle of white lotion.

He sits beside me on the bed.

"Roll over," he orders, and begrudgingly I move on to my front. Honestly, all this fuss… I feel very sleepy.

"Your ass is a glorious color," he says approvingly, and tenderly massages the cooling lotion into my pink behind.

"Spill the beans, Cullen," I yawn.

"Miss Swan, you know how to ruin a moment."

"We had a deal."

"How do you feel?"

"Shortchanged…"

He sighs, clambers in beside me and pulls me into his arms. Careful not to touch my stinging behind, we are spooning again. He kisses me very softly beside my ear.

"The woman who brought me into this world was a crack-whore, Isabella. Go to sleep."

Holy fuck… What does that mean?

"Was?"

"She's dead."

"How long?"

He sighs. “She died when I was four. I don’t really remember her. Carlisle has given me some details. I only remember… certain things. Please go to sleep.”

“Goodnight Edward.”

“Goodnight Bella.”

And I slip into a dazed and exhausted sleep, dreaming of a four-year-old green-eyed boy in a dark, scary, miserable place.

Chapter 41

There is light everywhere. Bright, warm, piercing light and I am trying to hide from it, keep it at bay for a few more precious minutes. I want to stay hidden just a few more minutes, but the glare is too strong, and I finally succumb to wakefulness. A glorious Seattle morning greets me – sunshine pouring through the full-height windows and flooding the room with too-bright light. Why didn't we close the blinds last night? I am in Edward Cullen's vast bed… minus one Edward Cullen.

I lie back for a moment staring through the windows at the lofty vista of Seattle's skyline. Life in the clouds sure feels… unreal. A fantasy – a castle in the air, adrift from the ground, safe from the realities of life – far away from neglect, hunger and crack-whore mothers. I shudder to think what he went through as a small child. I can see why he's up here, isolated, surrounded by beautiful, precious works of art – so far removed from where he started. Mission statement indeed. I frown because it still doesn't explain why I can't touch him.

It's so odd and apt, because I feel the same – adrift from reality – I'm in this fantasy apartment, having fantasy sex with my fantasy boyfriend, when in reality he wants a very special arrangement. Though he's said he'll try more, what does that actually mean? This is what I need to clarify in my mind and his, to see if we are still poles apart on the see-saw, or if we are inching closer together.

I clamber out of bed feeling stiff and, for want of a better expression, well-used. *Yes, that would be all the sex then…* My subconscious purses her lips disapprovingly. I roll my eyes at her, grateful that a certain twitchy-palmed control freak is not in the room, and resolve to ask him about the personal trainer… that's if I sign. My inner goddess glares at me with a slightly desperate look on her face. *Of course you'll sign*. I ignore them both and after a quick trip to the bathroom, I go in search of Edward.

He's not in the art gallery, but an elegant middle-aged woman is cleaning in the kitchen area. The sight of her stops me in my tracks. She has short blond hair and clear blue eyes; she wears a plain white tailored shirt and a navy blue pencil skirt. She turns and smiles warmly at me.

"Good morning, Miss Swan. Would you like some breakfast?"

Her tone is warm but businesslike, and I am stunned. Who is this attractive blonde woman in Edward's kitchen? I'm only wearing Edward's t-shirt. I immediately feel self-conscious, embarrassed, and practically naked.

"I'm afraid you have me at a disadvantage," I say quietly, unable to hide the anxiety in my voice.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry, Miss Swan. I'm Mrs. Cope, Mr. Cullen's housekeeper."

Oh.

"How do you do?" I manage.

"Would you like some breakfast, ma'am?"

Ma'am!

"Just some tea would be lovely, err, thank you… Do you know where Mr. Cullen is?"

"In his study, Miss Swan."

"Thank you."

I scuttle off towards the study, beyond mortified. Why does Edward only have attractive blonde women working for him? And a nasty thought comes involuntarily into my mind *Are they all ex-subs?* I don't want to entertain that hideous idea. I poke my head shyly around the door. He's on the phone, facing the window, in black pants and a white shirt. His hair is still wet from the shower, and I'm completely distracted from my negative thoughts.

"Unless that company's P&L improves I'm not interested, Kate. We're not carrying dead weight… I don't need any more lame excuses… Well, have Marcus call me, it's shit or bust time... Yes, tell Embry that the prototype looks good, though I'm not sure about the interface… No, it's just missing something… I'll want to meet him this afternoon to discuss. In fact, him and his team, we can brainstorm… Okay. Transfer me back to Angela…" He waits staring out of the window, master of his universe, staring down at the little people below from this castle in the sky. "Angela…"

Glancing up, he notices me at the door. A slow sexy smile spreads across his beautiful face and I'm rendered speechless while my insides melt. He is beyond any doubt the most beautiful man on the planet. Too beautiful for the little people below, too beautiful for me. *No,* my inner goddess scowls at me, not too beautiful for me. *He is sort of mine,* for now. The idea sends a thrill through my blood, and dispels my irrational self-doubt.

He continues his conversation, his eyes never leaving mine. "Clear my schedule this morning, but get Bill to call me. I'll be in at two. I need to talk to Marcus this afternoon, that will need at least half an hour… Schedule Embry and his team in after Marcus or maybe tomorrow, and find time for me to see Laurent everyday this week… Tell him to

wait… Oh… No, I don't want publicity for Darfur, tell Sam to deal with it… No… Which event?... That's next Saturday? Hold on."

"When will you be back from Florida?" he asks me softly.

"Friday."

He resumes his phone conversation. "Well I'll need an extra ticket because I have a date… Yes Angela, that's what I said, a date. Miss Isabella Swan will accompany me… That's all." He hangs up.

"Good morning, Miss Swan."

"Mr. Cullen," I smile shyly.

He walks gracefully around his desk and stands in front of me. I can smell his shower-gel. Oh, he smells so good, so clean and freshly laundered, so Edward. He gently strokes my cheek with the back of his fingers.

"I didn't want to wake you, you looked so… peaceful. Did you sleep well?"

"I am very well-rested, thank you. I just came to say hi before I had a shower." I gaze up at him. He leans down and gently kisses me, and I just can't help myself. I throw my arms around his neck and my fingers twist in his still damp hair. I pull my body flush against his and kiss him back. I want him. My attack takes him by surprise, but after a beat he responds, a low groan in his throat, his hands slip into my hair and down my back to cup my naked behind and his tongue exploring my mouth.

He pulls back, his eyes hooded.

"Well, sleep seems to agree with you," he murmurs. "I suggest you go and have your shower or I shall lay you across my desk… now."

"I choose the desk," I whisper recklessly as desire sweeps like adrenaline through my system, waking everything in its path. He stares bewildered down at me for a millisecond.

"You've really got a taste for this. You're becoming insatiable, Miss Swan."

"I've only got a taste for you," I whisper.

He gazes down at me and his eyes get wider, darker, his hand gently kneading my naked backside.

"Damn right, only me," he growls suddenly and with one fluid movement he clears all the plans and papers off his desk so that they scatter on the floor, sweeps me up in his arms and lays me down across the short end of his desk so that my head is almost off the edge.

"You want it, you got it baby," he mutters.

And I watch him produce a foil packet from his pants pocket while he unzips his pants. *Mr. Boy Scout*. He slowly rolls the condom over his impressive erection and gazes down at me.

"I sure hope you're ready," he breathes with a salacious smile across his face.

And in a moment he's filling me, holding my wrists tightly by my side and thrusting into me, deeply. I groan. *Oh yes…*

"Jeez Bella, you're *so* ready," he whispers in veneration.

I wrap my legs around his waist, holding him the only way I can, as he stays standing, staring down at me, green eyes glowing passionate, possessive, and he starts to move, really move. This is not making love, this is fucking – and I love it. I groan. it's so raw, so carnal. I feel so wanton. Embracing this side of myself, reveling in his possession, his lust, slaking mine. He moves with ease, luxuriating in me, enjoying me, his lips slightly parted, as his breathing increases. He twists his hips from side-to-side and the feeling is exquisite. Oh my. I close my eyes, feeling the build up. That delicious, slow, step climbing build. Pushing me higher, higher to the castle in the air. Oh, yes… His stroke increasing fractionally. I moan loudly. I am all sensation, all him. Enjoying every thrust, every push that fills me. And he picks up the pace, thrusting faster… harder… and my whole body is moving to his rhythm and I can feel my legs stiffening and my insides quivering… quickening.

"Come on, baby… Give it up for me," he cajoles through gritted teeth – and the fervent need in his voice – the strain I can hear – sends me over the edge, and I cry out a wordless, passionate plea, as I touch the sun and burn… falling around him, falling down, back to a breathless, bright, summit on earth. And he slams into me and stops abruptly as he reaches his climax, pulling at my wrists and sinking gracefully and wordlessly on to me.

Wow... that was unexpected. I slowly materialize back on earth.

"What the hell are you doing to me?" he breathes as he nuzzles my neck. "You completely beguile me, Bella. You weave some powerful magic."

He releases my wrists and I run my fingers through his hair, coming down from my high, and tighten my legs around him.

"I'm the one beguiled," I whisper.

He leans up and stares down at me, his expression is disconcerted, alarmed even. He places his hands on either side of my face, holding my head in place.

"You are mine," he says urgently each word a staccato. "Do you understand?" He's so earnest, so impassioned – a zealot. And the force of his plea is so unexpected, so disarming. I wonder why he's feeling like this.

"Yes, yours," I whisper, derailed by his fervor.

"Are you sure you have to go to Florida?"

I nod slowly. And in that brief moment I can see his expression change, shutters coming down. He withdraws from me suddenly, making me wince.

"Are you sore?" he asks, leaning over me.

"A little," I confess.

"I like you sore," his eyes smolder. "Reminds you where I've been, and only me." He grabs my chin and kisses me none too gently, then stands and holds his hand out to help me up. I glance down at the foil packet beside me.

"Always prepared," I murmur.

He looks at me confused as he redoes his flies. I hold up the empty packet.

"A man can hope, Isabella, dream even… and sometimes his dreams come true."

And he sounds so odd… his eyes burning at me, I just don't understand. My post coital glow is fading fast. *What is his problem?*

"So, on your desk… that's been a dream?" I ask dryly, trying humor to lighten the atmosphere between us. He smiles an enigmatic smile, that doesn't reach his eyes, and I know immediately this is not the first time he's had sex on his desk. The thought is … unwelcome, I squirm uncomfortably. The post coital glow has evaporated.

"Well, I'd better go and have a shower." I stand and, make to move past him.

He frowns at me and runs a hand through his hair.

"I've got a couple more calls to make. I'll join you for breakfast once you're out of the shower. I think Mrs. Cope has laundered your clothes from yesterday. They're in the closet."

What? When the hell did she do that? Jeez, could she hear us? I flush.

"Thank you," I mutter.

"You're most welcome," he replies automatically, but there's an edge to his voice. *I'm not saying thank you for fucking me…* although, it was very...

"What?" he asks, and I realize I'm frowning.

"What's wrong?" I ask softly.

"What do you mean?"

"Well… you're being more weird than usual."

"You find me weird?" He tries to stifle a smile.

I blush. "Sometimes."

He regards me speculatively for a moment.

"As ever, I'm surprised by you, Miss Swan."

"Surprised how?"

"Well, let's just say that was an unexpected treat."

"We aim to please, Mr. Cullen." I cock my head to one side, like he often does to me, and give his words back to him.

"And please me you do," he says softly... but he looks uneasy. "I thought you were going to have a shower."

Oh, he's dismissing me. "Yes… err… I'll see you in a moment."

I scurry out of his office completely dumbfounded by him. He seemed confused. *Why?* I have to say as physical experiences go, that was very satisfying, but emotionally – well, I'm rattled by his reaction. That was about as emotionally enriching as cotton candy is nutritious… sweet and sticky, but naughty, and bad for my teeth.

Mrs. Cope is still in the kitchen.

"Would you like your tea now, Miss Swan?"

"I'll have a shower first, thank you," I mutter, and take my blazing face quickly out of the room.

In the shower I try to figure out what's up with Edward. This could be a board game, like Monopoly. Dare I take a chance? Or will I head straight to jail and not pass go? He is beyond the most complicated person I know and I cannot understand his ever-changing moods. He seemed fine when I went into his study. We had sex, and then he wasn't. No, I don't get it. I look to my subconscious. She's whistling with her hands behind her back and looking anywhere but at me. She's not got a clue, and my inner goddess is still basking in a remnant of post-coital glow. No – we're all clueless.

I towel-dry my hair, comb it through with Edward's one and only hair implement, and put my hair up in bun. In the closet, Rose's plum dress has indeed been laundered, Mrs. Cope is a marvel, as have my lacy panties and bra. Well, at least he's given them back to me today. I slip on Rose's shoes, straighten my dress, take a deep breath and head back out to the living room.

Edward is still nowhere to be seen and Mrs. Cope is now checking the contents of the pantry.

"Tea now, Miss Swan?" she asks softly.

"Please." I smile shyly at her. I feel slightly more confident now that I'm dressed.

"Would you like something to eat?"

"No, thank you."

"Of course you'll have something to eat," Edward snaps, suddenly at my side, glowering at me. "She likes pancakes, bacon and eggs, Mrs. C."

"Yes, Mr. Cullen. What would you like sir?"

"Omelet please, and some fruit." He doesn't take his eyes off me, his expression unfathomable. "Sit," he orders, pointing to one of the bar stools.

I do as I'm told and he sits beside me while Mrs. Cope busies herself with breakfast. Gosh it's unnerving having some one else listen in yet again.

"Have you bought your air ticket?"

"No, I'll buy it when I get home – over the Internet."

He leans on his elbow, rubbing his chin.

"Do you have the money?"

Oh no…

"Yes," I say with mock patience, as if I'm talking to a small child.

He raises a censorious eyebrow at me. *Crap.*

"Yes I do, thank you," I amend rapidly.

"I have a jet. it's not scheduled to be used for three days. it's at your disposal."

I gape at him. Of course he has a jet. I have to resist my body's natural inclination to roll my eyes at him. I want to laugh, but I don't, as I can't read his mood.

"We've already made serious misuse of your company's aviation fleet. I wouldn't want to do it again."

"It's my company, it's my jet." He sounds almost wounded... Oh, boys and their toys!

"Thank you for the offer, but I'd be happier taking a scheduled flight."

He looks like he wants to argue further, but decides against it.

"As you wish," he says. "Do you have much preparation to do for your interview?"

"No."

"Good. You're still not going to tell me which publishing houses?"

"No."

He smiles slightly… finally.

"I am a man of means, Miss Swan."

"I am fully aware of that, Mr. Cullen. You're going to track my phone?" I raise my eyebrow at him.

"Actually, I'll be quite busy this afternoon, so I'll have to get someone else to do it." He smirks at me. *Is he joking?*

"Well, if you can spare someone to do that, you're obviously overstaffed."

“I’ll send an email to the head of human resources and have her look into our head count.” His lips twitch to hide his smile.

Oh thank the Lord he’s recovered his sense of humor.

Mrs. Cope serves us breakfast and we eat quietly for a few moments. Tactfully, after clearing away, she leaves us to it and heads out of the living area.

I peek up at him.

“What it is, Isabella?”

“You know, you never did tell me why you don’t like to be touched.”

He blanches and I feel momentarily guilty for asking.

“I’ve told you more than I’ve ever told anybody,” he says quietly, gazing at me impassively.

And it’s immediately clear to me that he’s never confided in anyone. Doesn’t he have any close friends? Perhaps he told Mrs. Robinson, and I want to ask him, but I can’t – I can’t pry that invasively. I shake my head at the realization. He really is an island.

“Will you think about our arrangement while you’re away?” he asks softly.

“Yes.”

“Will you miss me?”

I gaze at him. “Yes,” I answer honestly. How could he mean so much to me in such a short time. He's got right under my skin, literally...

He smiles, and his eyes light up.

“I’ll miss you, too. More than you know,” he breathes.

And my heart warms at his words. He really is trying… hard. He gently strokes my cheek, and bends down, and kisses me softly.

Chapter 42

It is late afternoon and I sit nervously in the lobby waiting for Mr. J Smith of Seattle Independent Publishing. This is my second interview of the day, and the one I'm really nervous about. My first interview went well, but it was for a large conglomerate with offices based throughout the US and I would be one of many interns there. I can imagine being swallowed up and spat out pretty quickly in such a corporate machine. SIP is where I want to be... it's small, unconventional, championing local authors, and has an interesting and quirky roster of clients. My surroundings are sparse, but I think it's a design statement rather than frugality. I am seated on one of two dark green chesterfield couches, made of leather – not unlike the couch that Edward has in his playroom. I stroke the leather appreciatively and wonder idly what Edward does on that couch… My mind wanders as I think of the possibilities. No – I must not go there now. I flush at my wayward and inappropriate thoughts. The receptionist is a young African-American woman with large silver earrings and long straightened hair. She has a bohemian look about her, the sort of woman I could be friendly with… the thought is comforting. This so feels like the right place for me. Every few moments she glances at up me, away from her computer, and smiles reassuringly. I tentatively return her smile.

My flight is booked; my mother is in seventh heaven that I am visiting; I am packed, and Rose has agreed to drive me to the airport. Edward has ordered me to take my BlackBerry and the Mac. I roll my eyes at the memory of his overbearing bossiness, but I realize now that's just the way he's made. He likes to assume control over everything, including me. Yet he's so unpredictably and disarmingly agreeable, too. He can be tender, good-humored… even sweet. And when it happens it's so left-field and unexpected. He insisted on accompanying me all the way down to my car in the garage. Jeez, I'm only going for a few days, he's acting like I'm going for weeks. He keeps me on the back foot permanently.

"Bella Swan?" A woman with flaming red hair, standing by the reception desk, distracts me from my introspection. She has the same bohemian, floaty look as the receptionist. She could be in her late thirties, maybe in her forties… it's so difficult to tell with older women.

"Yes," I reply, standing awkwardly.

She gives me a polite smile, her cool blue eyes assessing me. I am wearing one of Rose's dresses, a black pinafore over a white blouse, and my black pumps. Very interview, I think. My hair is restrained in a ponytail, and for once the tendrils are behaving themselves. She holds her hand out to me.

"Hello, Bella. My name's Victoria Morgan. I'm head of Human Resources here at SIP."

"How do you do?" I shake her hand. She looks very casual to be the head of HR.

"Please follow me."

We go through the double doors behind the reception area, into a large brightly decorated open plan office, and head into a small ante-room – a meeting room. The walls are pale green, lined with pictures of book covers. At the head of the maplewood conference table sits a young man with long blond hair tied in a ponytail. Small, silver, hooped earrings glint in both his ears. He wears a pale blue shirt, no tie, and grey flannel trousers. As I approach him he stands and gazes at me with fathomless darkest blue eyes.

"Bella Swan, I'm James Smith, the commissioning editor here at SIP, and I'm very pleased to meet you."

We shake hands, and his dark expression is unreadable, though friendly enough... I think.

"Have you traveled far?" he asks pleasantly.

"No, I've recently moved to the Pike Street Market area."

"Oh, not far at all then. Please, take a seat."

I sit in unison with Victoria, who takes a seat beside him.

"So why would you like to intern for us at SIP, Bella?" he asks. He says my name softly and cocks his head to one side, like someone I know – it's very unnerving. Doing my best to ignore the irrational wariness he makes me feel, I launch into my carefully prepared speech, conscious that a rosy flush is spreading across my cheeks. I look at both of them, remembering The Rosalie Hale Successful Interviewing Technique lecture – *maintain eye contact, Bella!* Boy, that woman can be bossy too sometimes. James and Victoria both seem to be listening politely.

"You have a very impressive GPA. What extra-curricular activities did you indulge in at WSU?"

Indulge? I blink at him, what an odd choice of word… I launch into details of my librarianship at the campus central library, and my one experience of interviewing an obscenely rich despot for the student magazine. I gloss over the part that I didn't actually write the article… I mention the two literary societies that I belonged to, and conclude with working at Newtons and all the useless knowledge I now possess about camping. They both laugh, which is the response I'd hoped for. I can feel myself relaxing into the interview and I begin to enjoy myself.

James Smith asks sharp, intelligent questions, but I'm not thrown – I can keep up, and when we discuss my reading preferences and my favorite books of those I've studied, I think I hold my own. James on the other hand appears to only favor American literature

written after 1950. Nothing else... no classics - not even Henry James or Upton Sinclair or F Scott Fitzgerald. Victoria says nothing, just nods occasionally and takes notes. James, though argumentative, is quite charming, in his way, and my initial wariness dissipates the longer we talk.

“And where do you see yourself in five years’ time?” he asks, smiling encouragingly.

With Edward Cullen… the thought comes involuntarily into my head. I frown at my errant thought.

“Copy editing, perhaps? Maybe a literary agent, I’m not sure. I am open to opportunities.”

He grins at me.

“Very good, Bella. Well, I don’t have any further questions. Do you?” He directs his question at me.

“When would you like someone to start?”

“As soon as possible,” Victoria pipes up. "When could you start?"

“I'm available from next week.”

“That’s good to know,” James says.

“Well, if that’s all anyone has to say,” Victoria glances at the two of us, “I think that concludes the interview, Bella.” She smiles kindly at me.

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Bella,” James says softly as he takes my hand. He squeezes it gently, so that I blink up at him as I say goodbye. For all her flouncy bohemian finery, Victoria is much more business-like and easier to deal with. She escorts me back to reception with the promise that I will hear very soon, and then I’m out into the cooling air of Seattle. I feel unsettled as I make my way to my car, though I’m not sure why. I think the interview went well, but it’s so hard to say... Interviews seem such artificial situations, everyone on their best behavior trying desperately to hide behind a professional façade. Did my face fit? I shall have to wait and see.

I climb into the car and head back to the apartment. I’m on the red-eye and I have a stopover in Atlanta, but my flight doesn’t leave until 10:25 this evening, so I have plenty of time.

Rose is unpacking boxes in the kitchen when I return.

“How did they go?” she asks, excited.

Only Rose can look gorgeous in an oversized shirt... Wait – is that Emmett’s? Tattered jeans and a dark blue bandana.

“Good, thanks Rose. Not sure this outfit was cool enough for the second interview…”

“Oh?”

“Boho chic might have done it.”

Rose raises an eyebrow.

“You and boho chic.” She cocks her head to one side - Gah! Why is everyone reminding me of my favorite Fifty Shades? “Actually, Bella, you’re one of the few people who could really pull that look off.”

I grin at her. “I really liked the second place. I think I could fit in there. The guy who interviewed me was unnerving though…” I trail off – shit I’m talking to foghorn Hale here…*shut up, Bella!*

“Oh?” The Rosalie Hale radar for an interesting tidbit of information swoops into action – a tidbit that will only resurface at some inopportune and embarrassing moment – which reminds me…

“Incidentally, will you please stop winding Edward up? Your comment about Jake at dinner yesterday… he’s very… jealous. It doesn’t do us any good, you know.”

“Look, if he wasn’t Emmett’s brother I’d have said a lot worse, Bella. He’s a real control freak, I don’t know how you stand it. I was only trying to make him jealous, give him a little help with his commitment issues.” She holds her hands up defensively. “But – if you don’t want me to interfere, I won’t,” she says hastily as I scowl.

“Good. Life with Edward is complicated enough, trust me.” Jeez… I sound like him.

“Bella,” she pauses staring at me. “You are okay, aren’t you? You’re not running to your mother’s just to escape?”

I flush. “No, Rose… it was you who said I needed a break.”

She closes the distance between us and takes my hands, a most unRose thing to do. Oh no, tears threaten…

"You're just… different. I hope you're okay, and whatever issues you're having with Mr. Moneybags… you can talk to me. And I will try not to wind him up, though frankly it's like shooting fish in a barrel with him. Look, Bella, if something's wrong you will tell me, I won't judge… Well, I'll try to understand."

I blink back tears. "Oh, Rose." I hug her. "He's very demanding... And I think I've really fallen for him."

"Oh, Bella… anyone can see that. And he's fallen for you. He's mad about you. Won't take his eyes off you. So possessive… If it wasn't him, I'd find that really sexy."

I laugh. "Do you think so?"

"Hasn't he told you?"

"Well, not in so many words."

"Have you told him?"

"Not in so many words…" I shrug apologetically.

"Bella! Someone has to make the first move, otherwise you'll never get anywhere."

What… tell him how I feel?

"I'm just afraid I'll… frighten him away."

"And how do you know he's not feeling the same?"

"Edward, frightened? I can't imagine him being frightened of anything…" But as I say it, I think of him as a small child… Maybe fear was all he knew then… Sorrow grips and squeezes my heart at the thought.

Rose looks at me just as I imagine my subconscious would look at me: pursed lips, narrowed eyes. Jeez, all she needs are the half moon specs and she could be 104.

"You two need to sit down and talk to each other."

"We haven't been doing much talking lately…" I flush. Other stuff. Non-verbal communication, and that's okay. Well, much more than okay… I flush some more.

She grins. "That'll be the sexing then! If that's going well, then that's half the battle, Bella. I'll grab some Chinese take-out. Are you ready to go?"

"I will be. We don't have to leave for a couple of hours or so."

"No, I'll see you in twenty." She grabs her jacket and leaves, forgetting to close the door… Oh, Rose! I shut it behind her and head off to my bedroom mulling over her words. Edward afraid of his feelings for me? Does he even have feelings for me? He seems very keen, says I'm his, but that's just part of his I-must-own-and-have-everything-now control-freak uber consumer self… surely. I realize that while I'm away I will have to run through all our conversations again and see if I can pick out telltale signs.

I'll miss you too… more than you know...

You've completely beguiled me…

Hmmm… maybe. I shake my head. I don't want to think about it now.

I am charging the BlackBerry, so I haven't had it with me all afternoon. I approach it with caution. No messages, none. I check again. No, not a thing. Oh… and I can almost taste my disappointment. I switch on the mean machine. Nope. No difference here either. *Same email address, Bella* my subconscious rolls her eyes at me, and for the first time I understand why Edward wants to spank me when I do that.

Okay. Well, I'll write him an email.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Interviews
Date: 1 June 2009 18:49
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Sir

My interviews went well today.
Thought you might be interested.
How was your day?
Bella

-

I sit and glare at the screen. Edward's responses are usually instantaneous. I wait… and wait.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: My day
Date: 1 June 2009 19:03
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Ms. Swan

Everything you do interests me, you are the most fascinating woman I know.
I'm glad your interviews went well.
My morning was beyond all expectations.
My afternoon was very dull in comparison.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Fine Morning
Date: 1 June 2009 19:05
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Sir

The morning was exemplary for me too, in spite of you weirding out on me after the impeccable desk sex.
Don't think I didn't notice. Thank you for breakfast. Or thank Mrs. Cope.
I'd like to ask you questions about her – without you weirding out on me again.
Bella

-

My finger hovers over the send button. I'll be on the other side of the continent this time tomorrow…

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Publishing and you?
Date: 1 June 2009 19:10
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella

'Weirding' is not a verb and should not be used by anyone who wants to go into publishing.
Impeccable? Compared to what, pray tell?
And what do you need to ask about Mrs. Cope? I'm intrigued.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Mrs Cope
Date: 1 June 2009 19:17
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Sir

Language evolves and moves on. It is an organic thing. It is not stuck in an ivory tower, hung with expensive works of art and overlooking most of Seattle with a helipad stuck on its roof.
Impeccable – compared to the other times we have… what's your word… oh, yes… fucked. Actually the fucking has been pretty impeccable, period, in my humble opinion, but then as you know I have very limited experience.

Is Mrs. Cope an ex-sub of yours?
Bella

-

My finger hovers over the send button… and I press it.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Language!
Date: 1 June 2009 19:22
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella

Mrs. Cope is a valued employee. I have never had any relationship with her beyond our professional one. I do not employ anyone I've had any sexual relations with. I am shocked that you would think so. The only person I would make an exception to this rule is you – because you are a bright young woman with remarkable negotiating skills. Though if you continue to use such language, I may have to reconsider taking you on here.

I am glad you have limited experience. Your experience will continue to be limited – just to me. I shall take impeccable as a compliment, though with you, I'm never sure if that's what you mean, or if your sense of irony is getting the better of you – as usual.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc From His Ivory Tower

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Not for all the Tea in China
Date: 1 June 2009 19:27
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen

I think I have already expressed my reservations about working for your company. My views on this have not changed, are not changing and will not change… ever.
I must leave you now as Rose has returned with food.
My sense of irony and I bid you goodnight. I will contact you once I'm in Florida.
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Even Twinings English Breakfast Tea?
Date: 1 June 2009 19:29
To: Isabella Swan

Goodnight, Isabella.
Have a safe flight.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Rose and I pull up outside the drop-off area at Seatac airport terminal. Leaning across, she hugs me.

"Enjoy Barbados, Rose. Have a wonderful holiday."

"I'll see you when I get back. Don't let old moneybags grind you down."

“I won’t.”

We hug again – and then I’m on my own.

I head over to check-in and stand in line, waiting, with my carry-on luggage. I haven’t bothered with a suitcase, just a smart rucksack that the Newtons gave me for my last birthday, in the vain hope that they could get me camping. I smile at the memory and pick at a stray thread on the seam of my jeans.

“Ticket please?” The bored young man behind the desk holds up his hand without looking at me. Mirroring his boredom I hand over my ticket, and my driver’s license as ID. I am hoping for a window seat if at all possible.

“Okay, Miss Swan. You’ve been upgraded to first class.”

“What?”

“So ma’am, if you’d like to go through to the first class lounge, and await your flight there...” He seems to have woken up, and is beaming at me like I’m the Christmas Fairy and the Easter Bunny rolled into one.

“Surely there’s some mistake…”

“No, no." He checks his computer screen again. "Isabella Swan – upgrade.” He simpers at me... ugh.

I narrow my eyes at him. He hands me my boarding card and I head off to feel uncomfortable in the first class lounge. Bloody Edward Cullen. Interfering control freak – he just can’t leave well alone.

Chapter 43

I am manicured, massaged, and I've had two glasses of champagne. The First Class lounge has many redeeming features. With each sip of Moet, I feel slightly more inclined to forgive Edward and his intervention. I open up my MacBook, hoping to test the theory that it works anywhere on the planet.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Over-Extravagant Gestures
Date: 1 June 2009 21:53
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen
What really alarms me is how you knew which flight I was on.
Your stalking knows no bounds. Let's hope that Dr. Banner is back from vacation.
I have had a manicure, a back massage, and two glasses of champagne – a very nice start to my vacation.
Thank you.
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: You're Most Welcome
Date: 1 June 2009 21:59
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan
Dr. Banner is back and I have an appointment this week.
Who was massaging your back?

Edward Cullen
CEO with friends in the right places, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Aha… pay back time. Our flight has been called so I shall email him from the plane… it will be safer. I almost hug myself with mischievous glee.

There is so much room in first class. Champagne cocktail in hand, I settle myself into the sumptuous leather window seat as the cabin slowly fills. I quickly call Charlie to tell him where I am – a mercifully brief call, as it's so late for him.

"Love you Dad," I murmur.

"You too, Bells. Say hi to your mom. Goodnight."

"Goodnight Dad." I hang up.

Charlie is in good form. I stare at my Mac, and I can feel the same childish glee building… opening my laptop and log into the email program.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Strong Able Hands
Date: 1 June 2009 22:22
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Sir
A very pleasant young man massaged my back. Yes… very pleasant indeed.
I wouldn't have encountered Jean-Paul in the ordinary departure lounge, so thank you again for that treat.
I'm not sure if I'll be allowed to email once we take off, and I need my beauty sleep since I've not been sleeping so well recently…
Pleasant dreams, Mr. Cullen… thinking of you.
Bella

-

Oh, he's going to flip out, and I shall be airborne and out of reach. Well, serves him right… if I'd been in the ordinary departure lounge then Jean-Paul wouldn't have gotten his hands on me. He was a very nice young man, in a blond, perma-tanned way. Honestly, who has a tan in Seattle? It's just so wrong. I think he was gay, but I'll just keep that detail to myself. I stare at my email. Rose is right, it is like shooting fish in a barrel with him. My subconscious stares at me with an ugly twist to her mouth. *Do you really want to wind him up?* What he's done is sweet, you know! He cares about you and wants you to travel in style. Yes, but he could have asked me – or told me. Not made me look like a complete klutz at check-in. I press send and wait, feeling like a very naughty girl.

"Miss Swan, you'll need to stow your laptop for take-off," the over-made-up flight attendant says politely with a large, white-toothed smile. She makes me jump, my guilty conscience at work.

"Oh, sorry…"

Oh crap, now I'll have to wait to know if he's replied. She hands me a soft blanket and pillow, still showing her perfect teeth. I put the blanket over my knees. It's nice to feel mollycoddled sometimes.

The cabin has filled up, except for the seat beside me, which is still unoccupied. *Oh no*… A disturbing thought crosses my mind. *Perhaps the seat is Edward's.* Oh shit… No, he wouldn't do that. Would he? I told him I didn't want him to come with me. I glance anxiously at my watch, and then the disembodied voice from the flight deck announces, "Cabin crew, doors to automatic and cross check."

What does that mean? Are they closing the doors? I can actually feel my scalp prickle as I sit in palpitating anticipation. The seat next to me is the only unoccupied one in the sixteen-seat cabin… I feel the plane jolt as it pulls away from its stand, and breathe a sigh of relief, but feel a faint tingle of disappointment too. No Edward for four days. I take a sneak peek at my BlackBerry.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Enjoy it While You Can
Date: 1 June 2009 22.25
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan
I know what you're trying to do – and trust me – you've succeeded. Next time you'll be in the hold, bound and gagged in a crate. Believe me when I say that attending to you in that state will give me so much more pleasure than merely upgrading your ticket.

I look forward to your return.

Edward Cullen
Palm-Twitching CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Holy crap. That's the problem with Edward's humor – I can be never be sure if he's joking or if he's seriously angry. I suspect on this occasion he's seriously angry. Surreptitiously, so the flight attendant can't see, I type a reply under the blanket.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Joking?

Date: 1 June 2009 22:30
To: Edward Cullen

You see – I have no idea if you're joking – and if you're not, then I think I'll stay in Florida.
Crates are a hard limit for me.
Sorry I made you mad.
Tell me you forgive me.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Joking
Date: 1 June 2009 22.31
To: Isabella Swan

How can you be emailing? Are you risking the life of everyone on board, including yourself, by using your BlackBerry?
I think that contravenes one of the rules…

Edward Cullen
Two Palms Twitching CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Crap. I put my BlackBerry away and sit back while the plane taxis to the runway, and pull out my tattered copy of Tess – some light reading for the journey. Once we're airborne I tip my seat back, and soon I'm drifting off to sleep.

The flight attendant wakes me as we start our descent into Atlanta. Local time is 7:30am but I've only had four hours sleep or so. I feel very groggy, and gratefully accept the glass of orange juice she hands me. I glance nervously at my BlackBerry… there are no further emails from Edward. Well, it's three o'clock in the morning in Seattle, and he probably wants to discourage me from screwing up the avionics system, or whatever prevents planes from flying if mobile phones are switched on.

The wait in Atlanta is only an hour. And again I'm luxuriating in the confines of the first class lounge. I am tempted to curl up and go to sleep on one of the plush, inviting couches that sink softly under my weight, but it will just not be long enough. To keep myself awake I start a long steam of consciousness to Edward on my laptop.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Do you like to scare me?
Date: 2 June 2009 06.52 EST
To: Edward Cullen

You know how much I dislike you spending money on me. Yes, you're very rich… but still it makes me uncomfortable... like you're paying me for sex. However, I like traveling first class, it's so much more civilized than coach. So thank you. I mean it – and I did enjoy the massage from Jean Paul… he was very gay. I omitted that bit in my email to you, to wind you up, because I was annoyed with you… and I'm sorry about that.

But as usual you overreact. You can't write things like that to me – bound and gagged in a crate. (Were you serious or was it a joke?) That scares me… you scare me. I am completely caught up in your spell, considering a lifestyle with you that I didn't even know existed until last Saturday week, and then you write something like that and I want to run screaming into the hills. I won't, of course, because I'd miss you. Really miss you. I want us to work, but I am terrified of the depth of feeling I have for you and the dark path you're leading me down. What you are offering is erotic and sexy, and I'm curious, but I'm also scared you'll hurt me – physically and emotionally. After 3 months you could say goodbye, and where will that leave me if you do? But then I suppose that risk is there in any relationship… this just isn't the sort of relationship I ever envisaged having, especially as my first. It's a huge leap of faith for me.

You were right when you said I didn't have a submissive bone in my body, and I agree with you now. Having said that, I want to be with you, and if that's what I have to do, I would like to try, but I think I'll suck at it, and end up black and blue – and I don't relish that idea at all.

I am so happy that you have said that you will try more. I just need to think about what 'more' means to me… and that's one of the reasons why I wanted some distance. You dazzle me so much I find it very difficult to think clearly when we're together.

They are calling our flight… I have to go.

More later
Your Bella

-

I press send, and make my way sleepily to the departure gate to board a different plane. This one has only six seats in first class, and once we are in the air I curl up under my soft blanket and fall asleep. All too soon I am woken by the flight attendant offering me more orange juice as we begin our approach to Jacksonville International. I sip slowly, beyond fatigued, and I allow myself to feel a modicum of excitement… I am going to see my

mother for the first time in six months. Sneaking another covert look at my BlackBerry, I remember vaguely that I sent a long rambling email to Edward – but there's nothing in response. Well, it's 5:30 am in Seattle – hopefully he's still asleep, and not up playing mournful laments on his piano.

The beauty of carry-on rucksacks is that one can breeze out of the airport and not wait endlessly for baggage at the carousels. The beauty of traveling first class is that they let you off the plane first.

My mom is waiting with Phil, and it is so good to see them. I don't know if it's because of exhaustion, the long journey or the whole Edward situation, but as soon as I'm in my mother's arms I burst into tears.

"Oh Bella, honey. You must be so tired."

I can feel her anxious glance to Phil.

"No Mom… it's just – I'm so pleased to see you." I hug her tightly. She feels so good and welcoming and home. Reluctantly I relinquish her, and Phil spins me around and gives me a huge bear hug.

"Still as sweet as ever, Bella. Why you cryin'?""

"Aw Phil… I'm just pleased to see you too." I stare up into his handsome square-jawed face and his twinkling blue eyes that gaze at me fondly. He takes my backpack.

"Jeez Bella, what have you got in here?"

Oh… that will be the Mac… and they both put their arms around me as we head for the parking lot.

I always forget how unbearably hot it is in Jacksonville. Leaving the cool air-conditioned confines of the arrival terminal we step into the Florida heat like we're wearing it. Whoa! It saps everything. There and then, I have to struggle out of Mom and Phil's embrace so I can remove my hoodie. I am so glad I packed shorts… I miss the dry heat of Phoenix sometimes, but this wet heat, even at 8:45 in the morning, takes some getting used to. By the time I'm in the back of Phil's wonderfully air-conditioned Tahoe SUV, I feel limp and my hair has started a frizzy protest at the heat. In the back of the SUV I quickly text Charlie, Rose and Edward:

Arrived Safely in Jacksonville. B:)

My thoughts stray briefly to Jake as I press send, and through the fog of my fatigue I remember that it's his show next week. Should I invite Edward, knowing how he feels about Jake? Will Edward still want to see me after that email? I shudder at the thought, then put it out of my mind. I'll deal with that later. Right now we're in Jacksonville morning rush hour.

"Honey, you must be tired. Would you like to sleep when we get home?"

"No, Mom… I'd like to go to the beach."

I am in my blue halter neck tankini, sipping a Diet Coke, on a sun bed facing the Altantic Ocean… and to think that only yesterday I was staring at the Pacific. My mother lounges beside me in a ridiculously large floppy sun hat and Jackie O shades, sipping a Coke of her own. We are on Neptune Beach, just three blocks from home. She holds my hand. My fatigue has waned, and I feel comfortable, safe, and warm under the sun. For the first time in forever, I start to relax.

"So, Bella… tell me about this man who has you in such a spin."

Spin! How can she tell? What to say? I can't talk about Edward in any great detail because of the NDA… but even then, would I choose to talk to my mother about it? I blanch at the thought.

"Well?" she prompts, and squeezes my hand.

"His name's Edward. He's beyond handsome. He's wealthy… too wealthy. He's very complicated and mercurial…" Yes – I feel inordinately pleased with my concise, accurate summary. I turn on my side to face her, just as she makes the same move. She gazes at me with her crystal-clear blue eyes.

"Complicated and mercurial are the two pieces of information I want to concentrate on, Bella."

Oh no…

"Oh, Mom… his mood-swings make me dizzy. He's had a grim upbringing, so he's very closed, difficult to gauge."

"Do you like him?"

"I more than like him."

“Really?” she gapes at me.

“Yes, Mom.”

“Men aren’t really complicated, Bella honey. They are very simple, literal creatures. They usually mean what they say. And we spend hours trying to analyze what they’ve said – when really it’s obvious. If I were you I’d take him literally. That might help.”

Take Edward literally… Immediately some of the things he’s said spring into my mind.

I don’t want to lose you

You’ve complete bewitched me

You’ve completely beguiled me…

I’ll miss you too… more than you know...

“And most men are moody, darling… some more than others. I used to think your father was moody. But now, well… I look back, and just think maybe he was too caught up in his job, and watching too much TV. You know how he likes his sports. Ironic really that I’m married to a sportsman now.” She grins at me and I know she’s trying to lighten the tone of our conversation. I put her out of her misery and smile back. Dad has nothing on Edward when it comes to moods.

“Phil wants to take us out tonight for dinner. To his golf club.”

“Oh no! Phil’s started playing golf?” I scoff in disbelief.

“Tell me about it,” groans my mother, rolling her eyes.

After a light lunch back at the house, I start to unpack. I am going to treat myself to a siesta… My mother has disappeared to mould some candles or whatever she does with them, and Phil is at work with his baseball team for a practice session, so I have time to catch up on some sleep. I open the Mac and fire it up. It’s two in the afternoon in Florida, eleven in the morning in Seattle… I decide to check for a reply from Edward. Nervously, I log into the email program.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Finally!

Date: 2 June 2009 10:30
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella

I am annoyed that as soon as you put some distance between us, you communicate openly and honestly with me. Why can't you do that when we're together?

Yes, I'm rich. Get used to it. Why shouldn't I spend money on you? We've told your father I'm your boyfriend, for heaven's sake. Isn't that what boyfriends do? As your Dom I would expect you to accept whatever I spend on you with no argument. Incidentally, tell your mother too.

I don't know how to answer your comment about feeling like a whore. I know that's not what you've written but it's what you imply. I don't know what I can say or do to eradicate these feelings. I'd like you to have the best of everything. I work exceptionally hard, so I can spend my money as I see fit. I could buy you your heart's desire, Isabella, and I want to. Call it redistribution of wealth if you will. Or simply know that I would not, could not, ever think of you in the way you described, and I'm angry that's how you perceive yourself. For such a bright, witty, beautiful young woman you have some real self-esteem issues, and I have a half a mind to make an appointment for you with Dr. Banner.

I apologize for frightening you. I find the thought of instilling fear in you abhorrent. Do you really think I'd let you travel in the hold? I offered you my private jet for heaven's sake. Yes it was a joke, a poor one obviously. However the fact is – the thought of you bound and gagged turns me on (this is not a joke – it's true). I can lose the crate – crates do nothing for me. I know you have issues with gagging, we've talked about that and if/when I do gag you we'll discuss it. What I think you fail to realize is that in Dom/sub relationships it is the sub who has all the power. That's you. I'll repeat this – you are the one with all the power. Not I. In the boathouse you said no. I can't touch you if you say no – that's why we have an agreement – what you will and won't do. If we try things and you don't like them, we can revise the agreement. It's up to you – not me. And if you don't want to be bound and gagged in a crate, then it won't happen.

I want to share my lifestyle with you. I have never wanted anything so much. Frankly, I'm in awe of you, that one so innocent would be willing to try. That says more to me than you could ever know. You fail to see I am caught in your spell, too… even though I have told you this countless times. I don't want to lose you. I am nervous that you've flown three thousand miles to get away from me for a few days, because you can't think clearly around me. It's the same for me, Isabella. My reason vanishes when we're together – that's the depth of my feeling for you.

I understand your trepidation. I did try to stay away from you; I knew you were inexperienced, though I would never have pursued you if I had known exactly how

innocent you were – and yet you still manage to disarm me completely, in a way that nobody has before. Your email for example: I have read and re-read it countless times trying to understand your point of view. Three months is an arbitrary amount of time. We could make it six months, a year… how long do you want it to be? What would make you comfortable? Tell me.

I understand that this is a huge leap of faith for you. I have to earn your trust, but by the same token you have to communicate with me when I am failing to do this. You seem so strong and self-contained, and then I read what you've written here, and I see another side to you. We have to guide each other Isabella, and I can only take my cues from you. You have to be honest with me and we have to both find a way to make this arrangement work.

You worry about not being submissive. Well, maybe that's true. Having said that, the only time you do assume the correct demeanor for a sub is in the playroom. It seems that's the one place where you let me exercise proper control over you, and the only place you do as you're told. Exemplary is the term that comes to mind. And I'd never beat you black and blue… I aim for pink. Outside the playroom, I like that you challenge me. It's a very novel and refreshing experience, and I wouldn't want to change that. So yes, tell me what you want in terms of more. I will endeavor to keep an open mind, and I shall try and give you the space you need, and stay away from you while you are in Florida. I look forward to your next email.

In the meantime, enjoy yourself. But not too much…

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Holy crap. He's written an essay like we're back at school… *and most of it good*. My heart is in my mouth as I re-read his epistle and I huddle on the spare bed practically hugging my Mac. Make our agreement a year? I have the power… jeez I'm going to have to think about that. *Take him literally,* that's what my mother says. He doesn't want to lose me…he's said that twice! He wants to make this work too. *Oh Edward, so do I*... He's going to try and stay away! Does this mean he might fail to stay away? Suddenly, I hope so. I want to see him. We've been apart less than twenty-four hours, and knowing that I can't see him for four days, I realise how much I miss him…. How much I love him.

Chapter 44

"Bella honey…"

The voice is soft and warm. Full of love and sweet memories of times gone by… and I feel a gentle hand on my face. My mom wakes me. I'm wrapped around my laptop, hugging it to me.

"Bella sweetheart," she continues in her soft singsong voice while I orientate into wakefulness, blinking in the pink-clouded dusk.

"Hi Mom." I stretch out and smile up at her.

"We're going out for dinner in thirty minutes. You still want to come?" she asks kindly.

"Oh yes, Mom, of course." I try very hard, but fail, to stifle my yawn.

"Now that's an impressive piece of technology." She points to my laptop.

Oh crap.

"Oh… this?" I try for casual, surprised nonchalance. Will Mom notice? She seems to have grown more astute since I acquired a 'boyfriend'. "Edward lent it to me. I think I could pilot the space shuttle with it, but I just use it for emails and Internet access." *Really it's nothing…*

Eyeing me suspiciously, she sits down on the bed and tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear.

"Has he emailed you?"

Oh double crap.

"Yeah…" The nonchalance is wearing thin, and I feel myself flush.

"Perhaps he's missing you, huh?"

"I hope so, Mom."

"What does he say?"

Oh triple crap. I frantically try to think of something acceptable from that email I can tell my mother. I'm sure she doesn't want to hear about Doms and bondage and gagging, but then I can't tell her because there's the NDA.

"He's told me to enjoy myself, but not too much."

"Sounds reasonable. I'll leave you to get ready, honey." Leaning over, she kisses my forehead. "I'm so glad you're here Bella. It's wonderful to see you." And with that loving statement she leaves. *Hmmm, Edward and reasonable*… two concepts that I thought were mutually exclusive, but after his email, maybe all things are possible. I shake my head. I will need time to digest his words. Probably after dinner – and I can reply to him then.

I climb out of bed and quickly slip out of my t-shirt and shorts. I have brought the grey halter-neck dress of Rose's that I wore for my graduation. It's the only dressy item I have, and one good thing about the heat is that the creases have dropped out, so I think it will do for the golf club. As I dress, I wake the laptop up. It has also enjoyed a snooze, napping with me, and I have to wait while the email program connects to cyberspace. There is nothing new from Edward, and I feel a stab of disappointment. Very quickly, I type him an email.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Verbose… You?
Date: 2 June 2009 19.08 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Sir, you are quite the loquacious writer. I have to go to dinner at Phil's golf club… and just so you know, I am rolling my eyes at the thought… but you and your twitchy palm are a long way from me so my behind is safe… for now. I loved your email.
Will respond when I can.
I miss you already.
Enjoy your afternoon.
Your Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your behind
Date: 2 June 2009 16.10
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan
I am distracted by the title of this email… Needless to say it *is* safe – for now.
Enjoy your dinner, and I miss you too, especially your behind, and your smart mouth.
My afternoon will be dull, brightened only by thoughts of you and your eye-rolling.
I think it was you who so judiciously pointed out to me that I too suffer from that nasty habit.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Eye Rolling
Date: 2 June 2009 19.15 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen
Stop emailing me - I am trying to get ready for dinner.
You are very distracting - even when you are on the other side of the continent.
And yes – who spanks you when you roll your eyes?
Your Bella

-

I press send, and immediately the image of that evil witch Mrs. Robinson comes into my mind. I just can't picture it… Edward being beaten by someone as old as my mother. It's just so wrong. Again I wonder about the damage that she wrought. I can feel my mouth set in a hard grim line. I need to find a doll to stick pins in, maybe that way I can vent some of the anger I feel at this stranger.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your behind
Date: 2 June 2009 16.20
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan

I still prefer my title to yours, in so many different ways. It is lucky that I am master of my own destiny and no one castigates me – except my mother, occasionally – and Dr. Banner, of course. And you.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Chastising… Me?
Date: 2 June 2009 19.25 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Sir
When have I ever plucked up the nerve to chastise you, Mr. Cullen?
I think you are mixing me up with someone else… which is very worrying.
I really do have to get ready.
Your Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your behind
Date: 2 June 2009 19.28
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan

You do it all the time in print. Can I zip up your dress?

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

For some unknown reason, his words leap out of the page and make me gasp. Oh… he wants to play games…

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: NC-17
Date: 2 June 2009 19.25 EST
To: Edward Cullen

I would rather you unzipped it.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Careful what you wish for…
Date: 2 June 2009 16.28
To: Isabella Swan

SO WOULD I.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Panting
Date: 2 June 2009 19.30 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Slowly…

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Groaning
Date: 2 June 2009 16.31
To: Isabella Swan

Wish I was there

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Moaning
Date: 2 June 2009 19.33 EST
To: Edward Cullen

SO DO I

-

"Bella!" My mother calls me, making me jump. Shit. Why do I feel so guilty?

“Just coming, Mom.”

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Moaning
Date: 2 June 2009 19.34 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Gotta go.
Laters, Baby.

-

I dash into the hall where Phil and my mother are waiting. My mother frowns slightly at me.

“Darling, are you feeling ok? You look at bit flushed.”

“Mom, I’m fine.”

“You look lovely, dear.”

“Oh, this is Rose’s dress. You like it?”

She frowns at me.

“Why are you wearing Rose’s dress?”

Oh… no.

“Well I like this one and she doesn’t,” I improvise quickly.

She looks at me appraisingly while Phil hops from foot to foot with impatience. Jeez, it's like he’s standing on the home plate.

“I’ll take you shopping tomorrow,” she says.

“Oh Mom, you don’t need to do that. I have plenty of clothes.”

“Can’t I do something for my own daughter? Come on, Phil’s starving.”

“Too right,” moans Phil, rubbing his stomach and assuming a fake pained expression. I giggle as he rolls his eyes and we head out the door.

Dinner is a delight. It is odd to see my mother in the rarified confines of the golf club, within its smug, cloying, self-reverential atmosphere. It seems an unlikely arena both for Phil and Mom, but they greet many other couples, obvious friends. Jeez, my way-out Mom at the golf club – go figure. I watch the two of them laughing and joking together, basking in the love they have for each other. Phil is attentive and warm. My mother is flirty and funny. It is a joy to see they are still as happy as the day they married. Conjugal bliss is alive and flourishing in spite of the sweltering Florida heat. We share a bottle of white wine and Mom tries to coax information out of me about Edward, but I manage to deflect her, even though I've had three glasses of wine.

Later when I'm in the shower, cooling under the lukewarm water, I reflect on how much my mother has changed… or maybe it's me. She always needed me, but now she has Phil, and they seem so good for each other. I'm really pleased for her. It means I can stop worrying about her and second-guessing her decisions.

And she's giving me good advice. *When did that start happening?* Since I met Edward. *Why is that?*

When I'm done, I dry myself quickly, keen to get back to Edward. There's an email waiting for me, sent just after I left for dinner, a few hours ago.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Plagiarism
Date: 2 June 2009 16.36
To: Isabella Swan

You stole my line.
And left me hanging.
Enjoy your dinner.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Who are you to cry thief?
Date: 2 June 2009 22.18 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Sir, I think you'll find it was Emmett's line originally.
Hanging how?
Your Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Unfinished Business
Date: 2 June 2009 19.22
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan

You're back. You left so suddenly - just when things were getting interesting.
Emmett's not very original. He'll have stolen it from someone.
How was dinner?

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Unfinished Business?
Date: 2 June 2009 22.26 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Dinner was filling, you'll be very pleased to hear. I ate far too much.
Getting interesting?
How?

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Unfinished Business - definitely
Date: 2 June 2009 19.30
To: Isabella Swan

Are you being deliberately obtuse?
I think you'd just asked me to unzip your dress.
And I was looking forward to doing just that.
I am also glad to hear you are eating.

Yours,

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Well… there's always the weekend
Date: 2 June 2009 22.36 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Of course I eat. It's only the uncertainty I feel around you that puts me off my food.
Oh, and I would never be unwittingly obtuse, Mr Cullen… surely you've worked that out by now.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Can't Wait
Date: 2 June 2009 19.40
To: Isabella Swan

I shall remember that, Miss Swan, and no doubt use the knowledge to my advantage.
I'm sorry to hear that I put you off your food.
I thought I had a more concupiscent effect on you.
That has been my experience, and most pleasurable it has been too.
I very much look forward to the next time.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Gymnastic Linguistics

Date: 2 June 2009 22.36 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Have you been playing with the thesaurus again?

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Rumbled
Date: 2 June 2009 19.40
To: Isabella Swan

You know me so well, Miss Swan.
I am having dinner with an old friend now, so I shall be driving.
Laters baby(c)

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Which old friend? I didn't think Edward had any old friends… except… ***her.*** I frown at the screen. Why does he have to still see her? Searing, green, bilious jealousy courses through me unexpectedly. I want to hit something, preferably Mrs Robinson. Switching the laptop off in a temper, I clamber into bed.

I should really respond to his long email from this morning, but I'm suddenly too angry. Why can't he see her for what she is… a child molester? I switch off the light, seething, staring into the darkness. How dare she? How dare she pick on a vulnerable adolescent? Is she still doing it? Why did they stop? Various scenarios filter through my mind. He had had enough… Then why is he still friends with her? Ditto her – is she married? Divorced? Jeez, does she have children of her own? *Does she have Edward's children?* My subconscious rears her ugly head, leering, and I'm shocked and nauseous at the thought. Does Dr. Banner know about her? I struggle out of bed and fire the mean machine up again. I am on a mission. I drum my fingers impatiently waiting for the blue screen to appear.

I hit Google images and enter 'Edward Cullen' into the search engine. The screen is suddenly littered with images of Edward… in black tie, be-suited, jeez – Jake's pictures from the Heathman, in his white shirt and flannel trousers. How did they get on the net? Boy he looks good. I move quickly on, some with business associates, picture after glorious picture of the most photogenic man I know… intimately. *Intimately… do I know Edward intimately?* I know him sexually, and I figure there's a lot more to discover there. I know he's moody, difficult, funny, cold, warm. Jeez, the man is a walking mass of contradictions. I click to the next page… he's still on his own in all these photographs, and I remember

Rose mentioning that she couldn't find any photographs of him with a date, prompting her gay question. And then, on the third page, there's a picture of me, with him, at my graduation. His only picture with a woman, and it's me. *How odd… I'm on Google*. I stare at us together. I look surprised by the camera, nervous, off balance. This was just before I agreed to try. For his part, Edward looks impossibly handsome, calm and collected, and he's wearing *that tie*. I gaze at him… such a beautiful face. A beautiful face that could be staring at Mrs. bloody Robinson right now. I save the picture in my favorites and click through all 18 screens… nothing. I won't find Mrs. Robinson on Google. But I have to know if he's with her. I type a quick email to Edward.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Suitable Dinner Companions
Date: 2 June 2009 23.58 EST
To: Edward Cullen

I hope you and your friend had a very pleasant dinner.
Bella
PS Was it Mrs. Robinson?

-

I press send and climb despondently back into bed, resolving to ask Edward about his relationship with that woman. Part of me is desperate to know more, and another part wants to forget he ever told me. And my period has started, so I must remember to take my pill in the morning. I quickly program an alarm into the calendar on my BlackBerry. Setting it aside on the bedside table, I lie down and eventually drift into an uneasy sleep, wishing that we were in the same city, not 3,000 miles apart.

After a morning of shopping and an afternoon on the beach, my mother has decreed we should spend the evening in a bar. Abandoning Phil to the TV, we find ourselves in a trendy bar at the One Ocean Resort Hotel at Atlantic Beach. I am on my second cosmopolitan, my mother is on her third. She is offering more insights into the fragile male ego… it's very disconcerting.

"You see, Bella, men think that anything that comes out of a woman's mouth is a problem to be solved. Not some vague idea that we'd like to kick around and talk about for a while and then forget about. Men prefer action."

"Mom, why are telling me this?" I ask, failing to hide my exasperation. She's been like this all day.

"Darling, you sound so lost. You've never brought a boy home. You never even had a boyfriend when we were in Phoenix. I thought something might develop with that boy you know from Forks… Jacob."

"Mom, Jacob's just a friend."

"I know, sweetheart. But something's up, and I don't think you're telling me everything." She gazes at me, her face etched with motherly concern.

"I just needed some distance from Edward to get my thoughts straight, that's all. He tends to dazzle me."

"Dazzle?"

"Yeah. I miss him though." I frown slightly. I have not heard from Edward all day. No emails, nothing… I am tempted to call him to see if he's okay. My worst fear is that he's been in a car accident. My second worst fear is that Mrs. Robinson has got her evil claws into him again. I know it's irrational, but where ***she's*** concerned I seem to have lost all sense of perspective.

"Darling, I have to visit the powder room."

My mother's brief absence allows me another chance to check my BlackBerry. I have been trying surreptitiously to check emails all day. Finally, a response from Edward!

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Dinner Companions
Date: 3 June 2009 21.40 EST
To: Isabella Swan

Yes, I had dinner with Mrs. Robinson.
She is just an old friend, Isabella.
Looking forward to seeing you again.
I miss you.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

He *was* having dinner with her. My scalp prickles as adrenaline and fury lance through my body. All my worst fears realized, crashing through me. How could he? I am away for two days and he runs off to that evil bitch.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Dinner Companions
Date: 3 June 2009 21.42 EST
To: Edward Cullen

She's not just an old friend.
Has she found another adolescent boy to sink her teeth into?
Did you get too old for her?
Is that the reason your relationship finished?

-

I press send as my mother returns.

"Bella, you're so pale. What's happened?"

I shake my head.

"Nothing… Let's have another drink," I mutter mulishly.

Her brow furrows, but she glances up and attracts the attention of one of the waiters, pointing to our glasses. He nods... he understands the universal language of 'same again please.'

As she does, I quickly glance at my BlackBerry.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Careful…
Date: 3 June 2009 21.46 EST
To: Isabella Swan

This is not something I wish to discuss via email.
How many Cosmopolitans are you going to drink?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Holy fuck, he's here.

Chapter 45

I glance nervously around the bar. I cannot see him.

"Bella, what is it?"

"It's Edward, he's here."

"Really?" She glances around the bar too. I have neglected to mention his stalker tendencies to my mom.

And then I see him. As he makes his way towards us my heart leaps, beginning a juddering thumping beat. *He's really here - for me.* My inner goddess leaps up from her chaise longue in anticipation. Moving smoothly through the crowd, his copper hair glinting under the recessed halogens, bright green eyes shining with… anger? Tension? His mouth is set in a grim line, jaw tense. Oh holy shit… no. I am so mad at him right now, and here he is. How can I be angry with him in front of my mother?

He arrives at our table, gazing at me warily. He's dressed in customary white linen shirt and jeans.

"Hi," I squeak, unable to hide my shock and awe at seeing him here in the flesh.

"Hi," he replies, and leaning down he kisses my cheek very quickly, taking me by surprise.

"Edward, this is my mother, Renee." My ingrained manners take over. He turns to greet my mom.

"Mrs. Dwyer, I am delighted to meet you." *How does he know her name?* He gives her the heart-stopping Edward Cullen patented full-blown-no-prisoners-taken smile. She doesn't have a hope. My mother's lower jaw practically hits the table. *Jeez, get a grip Mom.* She takes his proffered hand and they shake. My mother hasn't replied. Oh, complete dumbfounded speechlessness is genetic – I had no idea.

"Edward," she manages finally, breathlessly. He smiles knowingly at her, his green eyes twinkling. I narrow my eyes at them both.

"What are you doing here?" My question sounds more brittle than I mean and his smile disappears, his expression now guarded. I am thrilled to see him, but completely thrown off balance, my anger simmering through my veins. And I'm anxious about the email I just sent him. I don't know if I want to stand up and shout at him or throw myself into his arms – but I don't think he'd like either – and I want to know how long he has been watching us.

"I came to see you, of course." He gazes down at me impassively. *Oh, what is he thinking?* "I'm staying in this hotel."

"You're staying here?" I sound like a sophomore on amphetamines, too high-pitched even for my own ears.

"Well, yesterday you said you wished I was here. We aim to please, Miss Swan." His voice is quiet, with no trace of humor. *Crap, is he mad?* Maybe the Mrs. Robinson comments? Or

the fact that I am on my third, soon to be fourth, Cosmo? My mother is glancing anxiously at the two of us.

"Won't you join us for a drink, Edward?" She waves to the waiter, who is at her side in a nanosecond.

"I'll have a gin and tonic," Edward says. "Hendricks if you have it, or Bombay Sapphire. Cucumber with the Hendricks, lime with the Bombay."

Bloody hell, only Edward could make a meal out of ordering a drink.

"And two more Cosmos please," I add, looking anxiously at Edward. I am drinking with my mother, no way can he be angry about that.

"Please pull up a chair, Edward."

"Thank you, Mrs. Dwyer."

Edward grabs a nearby chair over and sits gracefully down beside me.

"So you just happen to be staying in the hotel where we're drinking?" I ask, desperately trying to keep my tone light.

"Or, you just happen to be drinking in the hotel where I'm staying. I just finished dinner, came in here and saw you. I was distracted, thinking about your most recent email, and I glance up and there you are… Quite a coincidence, I'd say." He cocks his head to one side and I can see a trace of a smile. Holy moly, we may be able to save the evening after all.

"My mother and I were shopping this morning, and on the beach this afternoon. We decided on a few cocktails this evening," I mutter banally.

"Did you buy that top?" He nods at my brand new green silk camisole. "The color suits you. And you've caught the sun. You look lovely."

I flush.

"Well, I was going to pay you a visit tomorrow. But here you are…" He reaches over, takes my hand and squeezes it gently, running his thumb across my knuckles, to and fro, and I feel the familiar pull, the electric charge zapping beneath my skin under the gentle pressure from his thumb, firing into my blood stream and pulsing around my body, heating everything in its path. It's been over two days since I saw him. Oh my... I want him. My breath hitches. I blink at him, smiling shyly, and I can see a smile play on his beautifully sculptured lips.

"I thought I'd surprise you. But as ever Isabella, you surprise me, by being here."

I glance quickly at Mom who is staring at Edward… yes, staring. *Stop it, Mom*. As if he's some exotic creature, never seen before. I mean, I know I've never had a boyfriend, and Edward only qualifies as such for ease of reference, but is it so unbelievable that I could attract a man? *This man? Yes, frankly – look at him* – my subconscious snaps. Oh, shut up. Who invited you to the party? I scowl at my mom, but she doesn't seem to notice.

"I don't want to interrupt the time you have with your mom. I'll have a quick drink and then retire. I have work to do," he states earnestly.

"Edward, it's lovely to meet you finally," Mom interjects. "Bella has spoken very fondly of you."

He smiles at her. "Really?" He raises an eyebrow at me an amused expression on his face and I can feel myself flush again.

The waiter arrives with our drinks.

"Hendricks, Sir," he says with a Floridian flourish.

"Thank you," Edward murmurs in acknowledgement.

I sip my latest Cosmo nervously.

"How long are you in Florida, Edward?" Mom asks.

"Until Friday, Mrs. Dwyer."

"Will you have dinner with us tomorrow evening? And please, call me Renee."

"I'd be delighted to, Renee."

"Excellent. If you two will excuse me, I need to visit the powder room."

Mom… you've just been. I look at her desperately as she stands and walks off, leaving us alone together.

"So, you're mad at me for having dinner with an old friend." Edward turns his burning, wary gaze to me, lifting my hand to his lips and kissing each knuckle gently.

Jeez, he wants to do this now?

"Yes," I murmur as my heated blood courses through me.

"Our sexual relationship was over long ago, Isabella," he whispers. "I don't want anyone but you. Haven't you worked that out yet?"

I blink at him.

"I think of her as a child molester, Edward." I hold my breath waiting for his reaction.

Edward blanches. "It wasn't like that," he whispers and I can hear the shock in his voice. He releases my hand.

"Oh… how was it then?" I ask.

He frowns at me, bewildered.

I continue, "She took advantage of a vulnerable fifteen-year-old boy. If you had been a fifteen-year-old girl and Mrs. Robinson was a Mr. Robinson, tempting you into a BDSM lifestyle, that would have been okay? If it was Alice, say?"

He gasps and scowls at me.

"Bella, it wasn't like that."

I glare at him.

"Okay, it didn't feel like that to me," he continues passionately. "She was a force for good. What I needed."

"I don't understand." It's my turn to look bewildered.

"Isabella, your mother will be back shortly. I'm not comfortable talking about this now. Later, maybe. If you don't want me here, I have a plane parked up in St. Augustine. I can go." *He's angry with me… no…*

"No – don't go. Please. I'm thrilled you're here. I'm just trying to make you understand. I'm angry that as soon as I've left, you have dinner with her. Think about how you are when I get anywhere near Jake. Jake is an old friend. I have never had a sexual relationship with him, whereas you and her…" I trail off, unwilling to take that thought further.

"You're jealous?" He stares at me, dumbfounded and his eyes soften slightly, warming.

"Yes, and angry about what she did to you."

"Isabella, she helped me, that's all I'll say about that for now. And as for your jealousy, put yourself in my shoes. I haven't had to justify my actions to anyone in the last seven years.

Not one person. I do as I wish, Isabella. I like my autonomy. I didn't go and see Mrs. Robinson to upset you. I went because every now and then we have dinner. She's a friend and a business partner."

Business partner? Holy crap. This is news.

He gazes at me, assessing my expression.

"Yes, we're business partners. The sex is over between us. It has been for years."

"Why did your relationship finish?"

His mouth narrows and his eyes gleam.

"Her husband found out."

Holy shit…

"Please can we talk about this some other time. Somewhere more private?"

"I don't think you'll ever convince me that she's not some kind of paedophile."

"I can see why you might think that, and I suppose technically that's true. But I don't think of her that way. I never have."

"Did you love her?"

"How are you two getting on?" My mother has returned, unseen by either of us.

I plaster a fake smile on my face as both Edward and I lean back hastily… guiltily. She gazes at me.

"Fine, Mom."

Edward sips his drink, watching me closely, his expression guarded. What is he thinking? Did he love her? I think if he did, I will lose it… big time.

"Well ladies, I shall leave you to your evening." *No, no, he can't leave me hanging like this.*

"Please put these drinks on my tab. Room number 612. I'll call on you in the morning, Isabella. Until tomorrow, Renee."

"Oh, it's so nice to hear someone use your full name."

“Beautiful name for a beautiful girl,” Edward murmurs, shaking her outstretched hands and she actually simpers. *Oh, Mom, et tu Bruté?*

I stand, gazing up at him, imploring him to answer my question, and he kisses my cheek, chastely.

“Laters baby,” he whispers in my ear, and then he’s gone.

Bloody bastard. My anger returns in full force. I slump into my chair and turn to face my mother.

“Holy crow, Bella. He’s a catch. I don’t know what’s going on between you two though. I think you need to talk to each other. Phew – the sexual tension in here, it’s unbearable.” She fans herself theatrically.

“MOM!”

“Go talk to him.”

“I can’t. I came here to see you.”

“Bella, you came here because you’re all confused about that boy. It’s obvious you two are crazy about each other. You need to talk to him. He’s just flown three thousand miles to see you, for heaven’s sake. And you know how awful it is to fly.”

I flush. I haven’t told her about his private plane.

“What?” she snaps at me.

“He has his own plane,” I mumble, embarrassed… *Why am I embarrassed?*

Her eyebrows shoot up.

“Wow,” she mutters. “Bella, there’s something going on between you two. I’ve been trying to get to the bottom of it since you arrived here. But the only way you are going to sort the problem, whatever it is, is to talk it through with him. You can do all the thinking you like, but until you actually talk, you’re not going to get anywhere.”

I frown at my mother.

“Bella, honey, you’ve always had a tendency to over-analyze everything. Go with your gut. What does that tell you, sweetheart?”

I stare at my fingers.

"I think I'm in love with him," I mutter.

"I know darling. And he with you."

"No!"

"Yes, Bella. Hell, what do you need? A neon sign flashing on his forehead?"

I stare up at her. I can feel tears prick the corner of my eyes.

"Bella, darling. Don't cry."

"I don't think he loves me."

"I don't care how rich you are, you don't drop everything and get in your private plane to cross a whole continent just for afternoon tea. Go to him! This is a beautiful location, very romantic. It's also neutral territory."

I squirm under her gaze. I want to go and I don't.

"Darling, don't feel you have to come back with me. I want you happy, and right now I think the key to your happiness is upstairs in room 612. If you need to come home later, do… If you stay, well… you're a big girl now. Just be safe."

I flush stars and stripes red. *Jeez, Mom.*

"Let's finish our cosmos first."

"That's my girl, Bella." She grins at me.

I knock timidly on room 612 and wait. Edward opens the door. He's on his cell. He blinks at me in complete surprise, then holds the door open wide, and beckons me into his room.

"All the redundancy packages concluded?... And the cost?..." Edward whistles between his teeth. "Sheesh, that was one expensive mistake… And Marcus?"

I look around the room. He's in a suite, like at the Heathman. The furnishings here are ultra modern, very now, all muted browns and golds with bronze starbursts on the walls. Edward walks over to dark wood unit and pulls open a door to reveal a mini-bar. He indicates that I should help myself, then wanders into the bedroom, I assume it's so I can no longer hear his conversation. I shrug. He didn't stop his call when I entered his study that time. I can

hear water running, like he's filling a bath. I help myself to an orange juice. He ambles back into the room.

"Well, have Angela send me the schematics. Embry said he'd cracked the problem…" Edward laughs. "No, Friday… There's a plot of land here that I'm interested in… Yeah, get Bill to call… No, tomorrow… I want to see what Florida will offer if we move in."

Edward doesn't take his eyes off me. Handing me a glass, he points to an ice bucket.

"If their incentives are attractive enough, I think we should consider it, though I'm not sure about the damned heat here… I agree Detroit has its advantages too, and it's cooler… Get Bill to call. Tomorrow, not too early." He hangs up and stares at me, his face unreadable, and the silence stretches between us... Okay, my turn to talk.

"You didn't answer my question," I murmur.

"No, I didn't," he says quietly, his green eyes blazing.

"No you didn't answer my question, or no you didn't love her?"

He folds his arms and leans against the wall, and a small smile plays upon his lips.

"What are you doing here, Isabella?"

"I've just told you."

He takes a deep breath.

"No. I didn't love her." He frowns at me, amused but puzzled too.

I can't believe I'm holding my breath. I feel like I sag like an old cloth sack, as I release it. *Well, thank heavens for that.* How would I feel if he actually loved the witch?

"You're quite the green-eyed goddess, Isabella. Who would have thought it?"

"Are you making fun of me Mr. Cullen?"

"I wouldn't dare." He shakes his head solemnly, but his eyes are gleaming wickedly.

"Oh, I think you would, and I think you do… often."

He smirks at me as I give him back the words he's said to me before, his eyes darken.

"Please stop biting your lip. You're in my room, and I haven't set eyes on you for nearly three days, and I've flown a long way to see you." His tone has changed… soft, sensual.

His BlackBerry buzzes, distracting us both, and he switches it off without glancing to see who it is. My breath hitches. I know where this is going… *but we're supposed to talk*. He stands upright, his hands loose at his sides, and he takes a step toward me, wearing his sexy predatory look.

"I want you, Isabella. Now. That's why you're here."

"I really did want to know," I whisper as a defense.

"Well now you that you do… are you coming or going?"

I flush as he comes to a halt in front of me.

"Coming," I murmur staring anxiously up at him.

"Oh, I hope so…" He gazes down at me. "You were so mad at me," he breathes.

"Yes."

"I don't remember anyone but my family being mad at me. I like it."

He runs the tips of fingers down my cheek. Oh my… his proximity, his delicious Edward smell. We're supposed to be talking. My heart is pounding, my blood singing as it courses through my body. Desire, pooling, unfurling… everywhere. Edward bends and runs his nose along my shoulder and up to the base of my ear, his fingers slipping into my hair.

"We should talk," I whisper.

"Later…"

"There's so much I want to say."

"Me too."

He plants a soft kiss under my earlobe, his fingers tightening in my hair and pulling my head back exposing my throat to his lips. His teeth skim my chin, and he kisses my throat.

"I want you," he breathes.

I moan and reach up and grasp his arms.

“Are you bleeding?”

He continues to kiss me… Jeez, does nothing slip by him?

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Do you have cramps?”

“No…” I flush. *Jeez.*

He stops and looks down at me.

“Did you take your pill?”

“Yes…” How mortifying is this?

“Let’s go have a bath.”

He takes my hand and leads me into the bedroom. It’s dominated by a super-kingsize bed with elaborate drapes, but we don’t stop there. He takes me into the ensuite, which is two rooms, all aquamarines and white limestone. It’s huge. In the second room, a sunken bath big enough for four people, with stone steps that lead into it, is slowly filling with water. Steam rises gently above the foam and I notice a stone seat all the way around. Candles flicker to the side… wow. He’s done all this whilst on the phone.

“Do you have a hair tie?”

I blink at him, fish into my jeans pocket and pull out a hair elastic.

“Put your hair up,” he orders softly.

I do as he asks.

The water is nearly at the top. It’s very warm and sultry beside the bath, my camisole starts to stick. He leans over and shuts off the faucet, and leading me back into the first part of the bathroom, stands behind me, as we face the wall-sized mirror above the two glass sinks.

“Lift up your arms,” he breathes.

I do as I’m told and he lifts my camisole over my head, so that I’m topless standing in front of him. Not taking his eyes off mine, he reaches around and undoes the top button on my jeans and the zipper.

“I’m going to have you in the bathroom, Isabella…”

Leaning down, he kisses my neck. I move my head to one side and give him easier access. Hooking his thumbs into my jeans he slowly slides them down my legs, sinking down behind me as he pulls them, and my panties, to the floor.

"Step out of your jeans, Isabella."

Grasping the sink I do just that. I am now naked, staring at myself, and he's kneeling behind me. He kisses and then softly bites my behind, making me gasp. He stands and stares at me. I try hard to stay still, ignoring my natural inclination to cover myself. He splays his hand across my belly, the span of his hand almost reaching from hip to hip.

"Look at you. You are so beautiful," he mutters. "See how you feel."

And he clasps both my hands in his, his palms against the backs of my hands, his fingers in between mine so that my fingers are splayed. He places my hands on my belly.

"Feel how soft your skin is..."

He moves them in a slow circle and then upwards towards my breasts.

"How full your breasts are."

He holds my hands so that they cup my breasts. He releases his thumbs and gently strokes my nipples, over and over. Oh my… I arch my back so my breasts push into my hands. He squeezes my nipples between his thumbs and mine, pulling gently so that they elongate further. I watch in fascination and groan loudly. Closing my eyes, not wanting to see the wanton woman falling apart under my own hands… his hands. Feeling my skin as he would, experiencing how arousing it is – just touch, and his calm, soft, commands.

"That's right baby," he murmurs.

He guides my hands down the sides of my body, past my waist to my hips, and across to my pubic hair. He pushes his leg in between mine, pushing my feet further apart, widening my stance, and he runs my hands over my sex, one hand at a time, in turn, setting up a rhythm. It is so erotic. Truly, I am a marionette and he is the master puppeteer.

"Look at you glow, Isabella," he whispers as he trails kisses and soft bites along my shoulder. I groan.

Suddenly he lets go. "Carry on," he orders and he stands back watching me. I rub myself… No, I want him - him to do it. It doesn't feel the same. I'm lost without him.

He pulls his shirt over his head and quickly takes off his jeans.

"You'd rather I do this?"

"Oh yes… please," I breathe.

He wraps his arms around me again, his green gaze scorching mine, and he takes my hands again, continuing the sensual caress across my sex, over my clitoris. I can feel his chest hair against me, his erection against me… *Oh soon, please*. He bites the nape of my neck and I close my eyes. Enjoying the myriad of sensations… my neck, my groin, the feel of him behind me. He stops abruptly and spins me around, circling my wrists with one hand, imprisoning my hands behind me, and pulling at my ponytail with the other. I am flush against him and he kisses me wildly, ravaging my mouth with his, holding me in place.

His breathing is ragged, matching mine.

"When did you start your period, Isabella?" he asks out of the blue, gazing down at me.

"Err... yesterday," I mumble in my highly aroused state.

"Good."

He releases me and turns me around.

"Hold on to the sink," he orders and pulls my hips back again, like he did in the playroom so I'm bending down. He reaches between my legs and pulls on the blue string… what! And gently but firmly tugs my tampon out… Holy Fuck… and tosses it into the nearby toilet. Sweet mother of all… Jeez… And then he's inside me… ah! Moving slowly at first, easily, testing me, pushing me. *Oh my.* I grip on to the sink panting, forcing myself back on him, feeling him inside me. Oh the sweet agony… And his hands clasp my hips. He sets a punishing rhythm… in, out and he reaches round and finds my clitoris, massaging me. Oh jeez. I can feel myself quicken.

"That's right baby," he murmurs as he grinds into me, angling his hips and it's enough to send me flying, flying high. Whoa… And I come, loudly, gripping for dear life onto the sink as I spiral down through my orgasm, everything spinning and clenching at once. He follows, clasping me tightly, his front on my back as he climaxes and calls my name like it's a litany or a prayer… *Oh, Bella!*

Chapter 46

His breathing is ragged in my ear, in perfect synergy with mine.

"Oh baby, will I ever get enough of you?" he whispers.

Oh my… Will it always be like this? So overwhelming, so all-consuming, so bewildering and beguiling. I wanted to talk, but now I'm spent and dazed from his lovemaking and wondering if *I* will ever get enough of *him*? We sink slowly to the floor and he wraps his arms around me, imprisoning me. I am curled on his lap, my head against his chest, as we both calm. Very subtly I inhale his sweet, intoxicating Edward scent. I must not nuzzle… I must not nuzzle… I repeat the mantra in my head, though I am so tempted to do so. I want

to lift my hand and draw patterns in his chest hair with my fingertips, but I resist, knowing that he'll hate it if I do. We are both quiet, saying nothing. Lost in our thoughts. I am lost in him… lost to him.

I remember that I have my period.

"I'm bleeding," I murmur.

"Doesn't bother me," he breathes.

"I noticed." I can't keep the dryness out of my voice.

He tenses slightly. "Does it bother you?" he asks softly.

Does it bother me? Maybe it should… should it? No, it doesn't. I lean back and look up at him and he gazes down at me, his eyes a soft moss green.

"No, not at all."

He smirks. "Good. Let's have a bath."

He uncurls from around me, placing me on the floor as he makes to stand. As he does, I notice again the small round white scars on his chest. They are not chicken pox, I muse absentmindedly… Esme said he was hardly affected. *Holy shit*… They must be burns. Burns from what? I blanch at the realization, shock and revulsion coursing through me. From cigarettes? Mrs. Robinson, his birth mother, who? Who did this to him? Maybe there's a reasonable explanation and I'm over-reacting. Wild hope blossoms in my chest, hope that I am wrong.

"What is it?" Edward's face is wide-eyed with alarm.

"Your scars," I whisper. "They're not from chicken pox."

I watch as in a split second he closes down, his stance changing from relaxed, calm, and at ease, to defensive – angry, even. He frowns at me, his face darkening, and his mouth presses into a thin, hard line.

"No, they're not." His voice is cold, but he does not elaborate further. He stands, holds his hand out for me and hauls me to my feet.

"Don't look at me like that." His voice is cold and scolding as he lets go of my hand.

I flush, chastised, and stare down at my fingers, and I know, I know that someone stubbed cigarettes out on Edward… I feel sick.

“Did she do that?” I whisper, before I can stop myself.

He says nothing, so I’m forced to look at him. He’s glaring at me.

“She? Mrs. Robinson? She’s not an animal, Isabella. Of course she didn’t. I don’t understand why you feel you have to demonize her.”

He’s standing there, naked, gloriously naked, with my blood on him… and we’re finally having this conversation. And I’m naked too. Neither of us has anywhere to hide, except perhaps the bath. I take a deep breath, move past him and step down into the water. It is deliciously warm, soothing and deep. I melt into the fragrant foam and stare up at him, hiding among the bubbles.

“I just wonder what you would be like if you hadn’t met her. If she hadn’t introduced you to your… err… lifestyle.”

He sighs and steps down into the bath opposite me, his jaw clenched with tension, his eyes frosty. As he gracefully submerges his body beneath the water, he’s careful not to touch me. *Jeez, have I made him that mad?*

He stares impassively at me, his face unreadable, saying nothing. Again, the silence stretches between us, but I hold my counsel. It’s your turn Cullen, I am not caving this time. My subconscious is nervous, anxiously biting her nails – this could go either way. Edward and I stare at each other, but I am not backing down. Eventually, after what seems like a millennium, he shakes his head and he smirks wryly.

“I would probably have gone the way of my birth mother, had it not been for Mrs. Robinson.”

Oh… I blink at him. Crack addict or whore? Possibly both?

“She loved me in a way I found… acceptable,” he adds with a shrug.

What the hell does that mean?

“Acceptable?” I whisper.

“Yes.” He stares intently at me. “She distracted me from the destructive path I found myself following. It’s very hard to grow up in a perfect family when you’re not perfect.”

Holy Crow… My mouth dries as I digest his words. He gazes as me, his expression unfathomable. He’s not going to tell me any more… how frustrating. Inside, I’m reeling. He sounds so full of self-loathing, and Mrs. Robinson loved him…*Holy shit,* does she still? I feel like I’ve been kicked in the stomach.

"Does she still love you?"

"I don't think so, not like that." He frowns, as if he hasn't thought about the idea. "I keep telling you it was a long time ago. It's in the past. I could not change it even if I wanted to, which I don't. She saved me from myself." He stares at me, exasperated, and runs a wet hand through his hair. "I've never discussed this with anyone." He pauses. "Except Dr. Banner, of course. And the only reason I'm talking about this now, to you, is because I want you to trust me."

"I do trust you, but I do want to know you better and whenever I try to talk to you, you distract me. There's so much I want to know…"

"Oh, for pity's sake, Isabella. What do you want to know? What do I have to do?" His eyes blaze at me, and though he doesn't raise his voice, I can tell he's trying to rein in his temper. I glance quickly down at my hands, beneath the water… the bubbles have started to disperse.

"I'm just trying to understand, you're such an enigma, unlike anyone I've met before. I'm glad you're telling me what I want to know." Jeez, maybe it's the Cosmopolitans making me brave, but suddenly I cannot bear the distance between us. I move through the water to his side and lean against him so we're touching, skin to skin. He tenses and eyes me warily, as if I might bite. *Well, that's a turnaround.* My inner goddess gazes at him in quiet, surprised speculation.

"Please don't be angry with me," I whisper.

"I am not angry with you, Isabella. I'm just not used to this kind of talking, this probing. I only have this with Dr. Banner and with…" He stops and frowns.

"With… her. Mrs. Robinson. You talk to her?" I prompt, trying to rein in my own temper.

"Yes, I do."

"What about?"

He shifts in the bath, so that he's facing me, causing the water to lap over the sides onto the floor, and places his arm around my shoulders, resting on the ledge of the bath.

"Persistent aren't you?" he murmurs, and I can hear a trace of exasperation in his voice. "Life, the universe, business. Isabella, Mrs. R and I go way back. We can discuss anything."

"Me?" I whisper.

"Yes," he murmurs, watching me carefully.

I bite my bottom lip, trying to curb the sudden rush of anger that surfaces.

"Why do you talk about me?" I sound whiney and petulant. I know I should stop… I am pushing him too hard. My subconscious has her Edvard Munch face on again.

"I've never met anyone like you, Isabella."

"What does that mean? Anyone who just didn't automatically sign your paperwork, no questions asked?"

He shakes his head. "I need … advice."

"And you take advice from Mrs. Paedo?" I snap, and I realize that the hold I have on my temper is more tentative than I thought.

"Isabella – enough," he snaps back sternly, his eyes narrowing at me, and I know I'm skating on thin ice and I'm heading into danger. "Or I'll put you across my knee. I have no sexual or romantic interest in her whatsoever. She's a dear, valued friend and a business partner. That's all. We have a past, a shared history, which was monumentally beneficial for me, though it fucked up her marriage, but that side of our relationship is over."

Jeez, another part I just can't understand… she was married as well. How did they get away with it for so long?

"And your parents never found out?"

"No," he growls. "I've told you this."

And I know that's it. I cannot ask him any further questions about her because he will lose it with me.

"Have you done?" he snaps.

"For now."

He takes a deep breath and visibly relaxes in front of me, like a great weight is lifted from his shoulders or something.

"Right – my turn," he mutters and his glare turns steely, speculative. "You haven't responded to my email."

I flush… Oh, I hate the spotlight on me, and if he's going to get angry every time we have a discussion… I shake my head. Perhaps that's how he feels about my questions, he's not used to being challenged. The thought is revelatory, distracting, and very unnerving.

"I was going to respond. But now you're here."

"You'd rather I wasn't?" he breathes, his expression impassive again.

"No, I'm pleased," I murmur.

"Good," he breathes and he gives me, a genuine, relieved smile. "I'm pleased I'm here too, in spite of the Swan Interrogation. So, while it's acceptable to grill me, you think you can claim some kind of diplomatic immunity just from my presence? I'm not buying it, Miss Swan. I want to know how you feel."

Oh no…

"I told you. I am pleased you're here. Thank you for coming all this way," I say feebly.

"It's my pleasure, Miss Swan." And his eyes shine at me as he leans down and kisses me gently. I feel myself responding automatically. The water is still warm, the bathroom still steamy. He stops and pulls back, gazing down at me.

"No… I think I want some answers first before we do any more."

More? There's that word again. And he wants answers… Answers to what? I don't have a secret past, I don't have a harrowing childhood… What could he possibly want to know about me that he doesn't already know?

I sigh, resigned.

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, how you feel about our would-be arrangement, for starters."

I blink at him. Truth or dare time. My subconscious and inner goddess glance nervously at one another. *Hell, let's go for truth.*

"I don't think I can do it for an extended period of time. A whole weekend being someone I'm not." I flush and stare at my hands.

He tips my chin up and he's smirking at me… amused.

"No, I don't think you could either."

And part of me feels slightly affronted, and challenged.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“Yes, but in a good way,” he says with a small smile.

He leans down and kisses me softly, briefly.

“You’re not a great submissive,” he breathes as he holds my chin, his eyes dancing with humor.

I stare at him shocked, then I burst out laughing – and he joins me.

“Maybe I don’t have a good teacher…”

He snorts. “Maybe. Perhaps I should be stricter with you.” He cocks his head to one side and gives me his crooked smile.

I swallow… Jeez, no. But at the same time my muscles clench deliciously deep inside. It is his way of showing that he cares, I realize that.

He’s staring at me, gauging my reaction. “Was it that bad when I spanked you the first time?”

I gaze back at him, blinking. Was it that bad? I remember feeling confused by my reaction. It hurt, but not that much in retrospect. He’s said over and over again it’s more in my head. And the second time… well, that was… good. Hot.

“No, not really,” I whisper.

“It’s more the idea of it?” he prompts.

“I suppose. Feeling pleasure, when one isn’t supposed to…”

“I remember feeling the same. Takes a while to get your head around it.”

Holy crow, this was when he was a kid…

“You can always safe-word, Isabella. Don’t forget that. And, as long as you follow the rules, which fulfill a deep need in me for control, and keep you safe, then perhaps we can find a way forward.”

“Why do you need to control me?”

"Because it satisfies a need in me that wasn't met in my formative years."

"So it's a form of therapy?"

"I've not thought of it like that, but yes, I suppose it is."

This I can understand. This will help. "But, here's the thing – one moment you say don't defy me, the next you say you like to be challenged. That's a very fine line to tread successfully."

"I can see that. But you seem to be doing it really well so far."

"But at what personal cost? I'm tied up in knots here…"

"I like you tied up in knots," he smirks.

"That's not what I meant!" I splash him in exasperation.

He gazes down at me. "Did you just splash me?"

"Yes…" *Holy shit. That look…*

"Oh, Miss Swan…" He grabs me and pulls me onto his lap, sloshing water all over the floor. "I think we've done enough talking for now." He clasps his hands on either side of my head and kisses me. Deeply. Possessing my mouth. Angling my head, controlling me. Oh my… this is what he likes. This is what he's so good at, and everything ignites inside me and my fingers are in his hair, pulling him to me, and I'm kissing him back and saying I want you too, the only way I know how. He groans and moves me so I'm astride him, kneeling over him. I can feel his erection beneath me.

He pulls back and looks at me, his eyes hooded, glowing green, lustful. I drop my hands to grab on to the edge of the bath, but he grips both my wrists and pulls my hands behind my back, holding them together in one hand.

"I'm going to have you now," he whispers and he lifts me so that I'm hovering over him. "Ready?" he breathes.

"Yes," I whisper and he eases me on to him slowly, exquisitely slowly, filling me, watching me as he takes me. Oh, I close my eyes and revel in the sensation, the stretching fullness. He flexes his hips and I gasp. Leaning forward, resting my forehead against his…

"Please let my hands go," I whisper.

"Don't touch me," he pleads softly and he releases my wrists and grabs hold of my hips. I clasp the bath ledge and move up and then down slowly, opening my eyes to gaze at him. He's watching me, his mouth open slightly, his breathing halted, stilted, his tongue between his teeth. He looks so… hot. We're wet and slippery and moving against each other. I lean down and kiss him. He closes his eyes. Tentatively, I bring my hands up to his head and run my fingers through his hair, not taking my lips from his mouth. This is allowed, he likes this… I like this. And we move together. I angle his head back and deepen the kiss, riding him faster, picking up the rhythm. I moan against his mouth. He starts to lift me faster… faster, holding my hips. Kissing me back. We are wet mouths and tongues, tangled hair and moving hips… oh my. All sensation, all consuming again. I am close… I am starting to recognize this delicious tightening, quickening. And the water, it's swirling around us, our own whirlpool, a stirring vortex, as our movements become more frantic… sloshing everywhere, mirroring what's happening inside me, and I just don't care. I love this man. I love his passion, the effect I have on him. I love that he's flown three thousand miles to see me. I love that he cares about me… he cares. It's so unexpected, so fulfilling, he's mine and I am his.

"That's right baby," he breathes.

And I come, my orgasm ripping through me, a turbulent, passionate, apogee that devours me whole. And suddenly, Edward crushes me to him, his arms wrapped around my back as he finds his release. "Bella… baby!" he cries and it's a wild invocation, stirring and touching the depths of my soul.

We lie staring at each other, green eyes into dark brown, face-to-face in the super king bed, both hugging our pillows on our fronts. Naked. Not touching. Just looking, admiring, covered by the sheet.

"Do you want to sleep?" Edward asks, his voice soft. And he is beautiful, his copper-colored hair vivid against the white Egyptian cotton pillowcase, green eyes, smoldering… expressive. He looks concerned about me.

"No. I'm not tired." I feel strangely energized. It's been so good to talk – I don't want to stop.

"What do you want to do?"

"Talk."

He smiles at me. "About what?"

"Stuff…"

"What stuff?"

"You."

"What about me?"

"What's your favorite film?"

He grins. "It could only be 'Good Will Hunting' of course."

His grin is infectious. "Of course. Silly me. Are you a math genius too? So many accomplishments, Mr. Cullen."

"And the greatest one is you, Miss Swan."

"So I am number seventeen."

He frowns at me not comprehending. "Seventeen?"

"Number of women you've err… had sex with."

His lips quirk up, and I can see his eyes shining with incredulity. "Not exactly…"

"You said fifteen." I can hear the confusion in my voice.

"I was referring to the number of women in my playroom. I thought that's what you meant. You didn't ask me how many women I'd had sex with."

"Oh." *Holy shit, there's more… How?* I gape at him.

"Vanilla?"

"No. You are my one vanilla conquest." He shakes his head, still grinning at me. Why does he find this funny? And why am I grinning back at him like an idiot?

"I can't give you a number. I didn't put notches in the bedpost or anything."

"What are we talking – tens, hundreds… thousands?"

"Tens… We're in the tens, for pity's sake."

"All submissives?"

"Yes."

“Stop grinning at me,” I scold him mildly, trying and failing to keep a straight face.

“I can’t. You’re funny.”

“Funny peculiar or funny ha ha?”

“A bit of both, I think…” His words mirror mine.

“Well that’s a damned cheek, coming from you.”

He leans across and kisses the tip of my nose.

“This will shock you, Isabella. Ready?”

I nod, wide-eyed, still with the stupid grin on my face.

“All submissives, in training… When I was training. There are places in and around Seattle that one can go and practice, learn to do what I do,” he says simply.

What?

“Oh.” I blink at him.

“Yep, I’ve paid for sex Isabella.”

“Well, that’s nothing to be proud of,” I mutter haughtily. “And you’re right… I am deeply shocked. And cross that I can’t shock you.”

“You wore my underwear.”

“Did that shock you?”

“Yes.” My inner goddess pole-vaults over the fifteen meter bar.

“You didn’t wear your panties to my parents.”

“Did that shock you?”

“Yes.”

Jeez, the bar’s moved to sixteen meters.

“It seems I can only shock you in the underwear department.”

“You told me you were a virgin. That’s the biggest shock I’ve ever had…”

“Yes, your face was a picture.” I giggle.

“You let me work you over with a riding crop.”

“Did that shock you?”

“Yep.”

I grin. “Well, I may let you do it again.”

“Oh I do hope so, Miss Swan. This weekend.”

“Okay,” I agree, shyly.

“Okay?”

“Yes, I’ll go to the red room of pain again.”

“You say my name.”

“That shocks you?”

“The fact that I like it shocks me.”

“Edward.”

He grins. “I want to do something tomorrow.” His eyes glow with excitement.

“What?”

“A surprise… for you,” he says softly.

I raise an eyebrow and stifle a yawn at the same time.

“Am I boring you, Miss Swan?” His tone is sardonic.

“Never.”

He leans across and kisses me gently on my lips.

“Sleep,” he commands softly and switches off the light.

And in this quiet moment, as I close my eyes, spent and sated, I think I'm in the eye of the storm. And in spite of all he's said, and what he hasn't said, I don't think I have ever been so happy.

Chapter 47

Edward stands in a steel-barred cage. He's wearing his soft, ripped jeans… and that's all. He's mouthwateringly naked and staring at me. His private-joke smile is etched on his beautiful face, his eyes a molten green. In his hands, he holds a bowl of strawberries. He ambles gracefully to the front of the cage, gazing intently at me. Holding up a plump ripe strawberry he extends his hand through the bars.

"Eat," he says softly and I can picture his tongue caressing the front of his palate as he enunciates the 't'.

I try and move toward him, but I'm tethered, held back by some unseen force around my wrist… holding me. *Let me go*...

"Come, eat," he says, smiling his delicious crooked smile.

I pull and pull… *let me go!* And I want to scream and shout, but no sound emerges. I am mute. He stretches a little further, and the strawberry is at my lips…

"Eat, Isabella," and his mouth cradles my name, lingering sensually on each syllable.

I open my mouth, and bite… and the cage disappears, and my hands are free. I reach up to touch him, graze my fingers through his chest hair.

"Isabella…"

No… I moan.

"Come on, baby."

No, I want to touch you.

"Wake up."

No, please. My eyes flicker unwillingly open for a split second. I am in bed and someone is nuzzling my ear.

"Wake up, baby," he whispers and the effect of his sweet voice spreads like warm melted caramel through my veins. It's Edward. Jeez, it's still dark, and the image of him with the strawberries, his naked chest, persists, disconcerting and tantalizing in my head.

"Oh… no," I groan. I want back at that chest. Jeez, why is Edward waking me? It's the middle of the night, or so it feels. Holy crow… does he want sex… now?

"Time to get up baby, I'm going to switch on the sidelight," he says softly.

"No," I groan.

"I want to chase the dawn with you," he says softly, kissing my face… my eyelids, the tip of my nose my mouth and I open my eyes. The sidelight is on.

"Good morning, beautiful," he murmurs.

I groan and he smiles.

"You are so not a morning person," he murmurs.

Through the haze of light I squint and see Edward leaning over me, smiling. Amused. Amused at me. Dressed! In black.

“I thought you wanted sex,” I grumble.

“Isabella, I always want sex with you. It’s heartwarming to know that you feel the same,” he says dryly. I gaze at him as my eyes adjust to the light, but he still looks amused, thank heavens.

“Well of course I do, just not when it’s so late.”

“Anyway it’s not late, it’s early. Come on – up you get. We’re going out. I'll take a rain check on the sex.”

“I was having such a nice dream,” I moan.

“Dream about what?” he asks patiently.

“…You.” I blush.

“What was I doing this time?”

“Trying to feed me strawberries.”

His lips twitch with a trace of a smile. “Dr. Banner could have a field day with that. Up – get dressed. Don’t bother to shower, we can do that later.”

We!

I sit up, the sheet falling down my body, revealing me… and he stands to give me room, his eyes dark.

“What time is it?”

“Six o'clock in the morning.”

“Feels like three.”

“We don’t have much time. I let you sleep as long as possible. Come.”

“Can’t I have a shower?”

He sighs.

"If you have a shower, I'll want one with you, and you and I know what will happen then – the day will just go. Come."

And I can see he is beyond excited. Like a small boy, he's iridescent with anticipation and excitement. It makes me smile.

"What are we doing?'

"It's a surprise. I told you."

I can't help but grin up at him.

"Okay…" I clamber off the bed and search for my clothes. Of course they are neatly folded on the chair beside my bed. He's laid out a pair of his jersey boxer briefs too, Ralph Lauren, no less. I slip them on and he grins at me. Hmmm, another piece of Edward Cullen's underwear – a trophy to add to my collection – along with the car, the blackberry, the Mac, his black jacket and a set of old valuable first editions. I shake my head at his largesse, and I frown as a scene from Tess crosses my mind: the strawberry scene. It evokes my dream. To hell with Dr. Banner, Freud would have a field day… and then he'd probably expire trying to deal with Fifty Shades.

"I'll give you some room, now that you're up." Edward exits toward the living area and I wander quickly into the bathroom. I have needs to attend to, and I want a quick wash.

Seven minutes later, I am in the living area, scrubbed, brushed and dressed in jeans and camisole… and Edward Cullen's drawers. Edward glances up from the small dining table where he's eating breakfast. Breakfast! Jeez, at this time.

"Eat," he says. *Holy crow… my dream.* I stare at him briefly, thinking about his tongue on his palate. *Hmmm, his expert tongue...*

"Isabella," he says sternly, pulling me out of my reverie. It really is too early for me. How to handle this?

"I'll have some tea. Can I take a croissant for later?"

He eyes me suspiciously and I smile very sweetly.

"Don't rain on my parade, Isabella," he warns softly.

"I will eat… later… when my stomach's woken up. About seven thirty, okay?"

"Okay." He peers imperiously at me… honestly. I have to concentrate hard on not making a face at him.

“I want to roll my eyes at you.”

“By all means do… and you will make my day,” he says sternly.

I gaze up at the ceiling. “Well, a spanking would wake me up, I suppose.” I purse my lips in quiet contemplation. Edward’s mouth drops open.

“On the other hand, I don’t want you to be all hot and bothered. The climate here is warm enough.” I shrug nonchalantly.

Edward closes his mouth and tries very hard to look displeased, but fails hopelessly. I can see the humor lurking in the back of his eyes.

“You are, as ever, challenging, Miss Swan. Drink your tea.”

I notice the Twinings label and inside my heart sings… *See, he does care,* my subconscious mouths at me. I sit and face him, gazing, drinking in his beauty. Will I ever get enough of this man?

As we leave the room, Edward throws a sweatshirt at me.

“You’ll need this.”

I look at him, puzzled.

“Trust me.” He grins, leans over and kisses me quickly on the lips, then grabs my hand and we head out.

Outside, in the relative cool of the half-light of pre-dawn, the valet hands Edward a set of keys to a flashy sports car with a soft top. I raise an eyebrow at Edward, who smirks back at me.

“You know, sometimes, I love being me,” he says, with a conspiratorial but self-congratulatory smug grin… that I simply can’t help emulating. He's so lovable when he's playful and carefree. He opens my car door with an exaggerated bow and in I climb. He is in such a good mood.

“Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” He grins as he slips the car into drive and we head out on to Atlantic Boulevard. He programs the sat nav and presses a switch on the steering wheel and Aaron Neville’s sweet dulcet tones fill the car as we cruise through the darkness.

If you want something to play with

Go and find yourself a toy

Baby my time is too expensive

And I'm not a little boy

If you are serious

Don't play with my heart

It makes me furious

But if you want me to love you

The-a-baby I will, girl you know that I will

Tell it like it is

Edward glances at me and smirks. I squirm uncomfortably in the plush leather seat. *Is he trying to tell me something?* Well, looks like we're back to cryptic Cullen. Haven't seen him for a while. I stare fixedly ahead, concentrating on the lyrics.

Don't be ashamed to let your conscience be your guide

But I know deep down inside me

I believe you love me, forget your foolish pride

Life is too short to have sorrow

You may be here today and gone tomorrow

You might as well get what you want

So go on and live, baby go on and live

Tell it like it is ...

"Do you want to choose some music? This is on my iPod." Edward has that secret smile again. I can't see his iPod anywhere. He taps the screen on the console between us, and behold - there is a playlist.

"You choose." His lips quirk up and I know it's a challenge.

Edward Cullen's iPod… Hmmm, this should be interesting. I scroll quickly through the touch screen, and find the perfect song. I press play. I wouldn't have figured him for a Britney fan.

Baby, can't you see

I'm calling

A guy like you

Should wear a warning

It's dangerous

I'm fallin'

Edward grins.

There's no escape

I can't wait

I need a hit

Baby, give me it

You're dangerous

I'm lovin' it

With a taste of your lips

I'm on a ride

You're toxic I'm slipping under

With a taste of a poison paradise

I'm addicted to you

Don't you know that you're toxic…?

"Toxic, eh?'"

"I don't know what you mean." I feign innocence.

He turns the music down a little, and inside I am hugging myself and my inner goddess is standing on the podium awaiting her gold medal. He turned the music down. Victory!

"I didn't put that song on my iPod," he says casually, and puts his foot down, so that I am thrown back into my seat as the car accelerates along the freeway.

And he knows what he's doing… bastard. *Who did?* And I have to listen to Britney going on and on… *who… who?*

The song ends and the iPod shuffles to Damien Rice… being mournful. *Who? Who?* I stare out of the window. My stomach churning... who?

"It was Lauren," he answers my unspoken thoughts. *How does he do that?*

"Lauren?"

"An ex, who put the song on my iPod."

Damien warbles away in the background, as I sit stunned.

An ex… ex-submissive? An ex…

"One of the fifteen?"

"Yes."

"What happened to her?"

"We finished."

"Why?"

Oh jeez, it's too early for this kind of conversation. But he looks relaxed, happy even... verbose.

"She wanted more," he says softly.

And he leaves the sentence hanging there ending with that powerful little word again.

"And you didn't," I ask, before I can employ my brain to mouth filter. Shit, do I want to know?

He shakes his head.

"I've never wanted more… until I met you."

I gasp, reeling. *Oh my.* Isn't this what I want? He wants more… *He wants it too.* My inner goddess has back flipped off the podium and is doing cartwheels around the stadium. It's not just me…

"What happened to the other fourteen?" I ask. Jeez, he's talking, take advantage.

"You want a list? Divorced, beheaded, died?"

"You're not Henry VIII."

"Okay, in no particular order, I've only had long term relationships with four women, apart from Irina…"

"Irina?"

"Mrs. Robinson to you." He half smiles his secret private joke smile.

Irina! The evil one has a name… Holy fuck. And its all-foreign sounding. A vision of a glorious pale-skinned vamp with dark hair and ruby-red lips comes to mind, and I know that she's beautiful… I must not dwell. I must not dwell.

"What happened to the four?" I ask to distract myself.

"So inquisitive, so eager for information, Miss Swan," he scolds playfully.

"Oh, Mr. When Is Your Period Due?"

"Isabella, a man needs to know these things."

"Does he?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you to get pregnant."

"Neither do I! Well, not for a few years yet."

Edward blinks at me, and then visibly relaxes. Okay… Edward doesn't want children… now or never? I am reeling from his sudden, unprecedented attack of candor. Perhaps it's the early morning? Something in the water? The air? What else do I want to know? *Carpe Diem…*

"So the other four… what happened?" I ask.

"One met someone else. The other three wanted – more. I wasn't in the market for more then."

"And the others?" I press.

He glances at me briefly and just shakes his head. "Just didn't work out."

Whoa… a bucket load of information to process. I glance in the side mirror of the car and I notice the soft swell of pink and aquamarine in the sky behind. Dawn is following us.

"Where are we headed?" I ask, perplexed.

"An airfield."

"We're not going back to Seattle are we?" And I cannot keep the alarm out of my voice. I haven't said goodbye to my mom. Jeez, she's expecting us for dinner.

He laughs. "No, Isabella, we're going to indulge in my second favorite pastime."

"Second?" I frown at him.

"Yep, I told you my favorite this morning."

I glance at his glorious profile, frowning…

"Having you, Miss Swan, that's got to be top of my list. Any way I can get you."

Oh…

"Well, that's quite high up on my list of diverting kinky priorities, too." I flush.

"I'm pleased to hear it," he mutters seductively.

"So… airfield?"

He grins at me. “Soaring.”

The term rings a vague bell in the back of my brain. He’s mentioned it before…

“We’re going to chase the dawn, Isabella.” He turns and grins at me as the sat nav urges him to turn right into what looks like an industrial complex. He pulls up outside a large white building with a sign reading Herlong Airport.

Gliding! We’re going gliding?

He switches off the engine.

“You up for this?” he asks gently.

“You’re flying?”

“Yes.”

“Yes please,” I say without hesitation.

He grins at me, leans forward, and kisses me very quickly.

“Another first Miss Swan,” he says and climbs out of the car. First… what sort of first? First time flying a glider… shit! No, he said that he’s done it before… I relax.

He walks around and opens my door. The sky has turned to a subtle opal, shimmering and glowing softly behind the sporadic childlike clouds. Dawn is upon us.

Taking my hand, Edward leads me around the building to a large stretch of tarmac where several planes are parked. Waiting beside them is a man with a shaved head and a wild look in his eye, accompanied by… Taylor.

Taylor! Does Edward go any where without that man? I beam at him and he smiles kindly back at me.

“Mr. Cullen, this is your tow-pilot, Mr. Mark Benson,” says Taylor. Edward and Benson shake hands and strike up a conversation, which sounds very technical, about wind speed, directions and the like.

“Hello Taylor,” I murmur shyly.

“Miss Swan.” He nods a greeting at me.

I frown at him.

"Bella," he corrects himself. "He's been hell on wheels the last few days. Glad we're here," he says conspiratorially.

Oh… this is news – Why? Surely not because of me! Revelation Thursday… must be something in the Jacksonville water that makes these men loosen up a bit.

"Isabella," Edward summons me. "Come." He holds out his hand.

"See you later." I smile at Taylor and giving me a quick salute he heads back to the parking lot.

"Mr. Benson, this is my girlfriend, Isabella Swan."

"Pleased to meet you," I murmur and we shake hands. Benson gives me a dazzling smile.

"Likewise," he says and I can tell from his accent that he's British.

As I take Edward's hand, I can feel a mounting excitement in my belly. Wow… gliding! We follow Mark Benson out across the tarmac toward the runway. He and Edward keep up a running conversation. I catch the gist. We will be in a Blanik L-23 which is apparently better than the L-13 although this is open to debate. Benson will be flying a Piper Pawnee. He's been flying taildraggers for about four years now… well, it all means nothing to me, but glancing up at Edward, he is so animated, so in his element, it's a pleasure to watch him.

The plane itself is long, sleek and white with orange stripes. It has a small cockpit with two seats, one in front of the other, and it's attached by a long white cable to a small, conventional, single-propeller plane. Benson opens the large clear Perspex dome that frames the cockpit, allowing us to climb in.

"You'll need this," he says, handing me a weighty cushion.

I frown at him. "What's this for?"

"Means you don't eat enough," Edward chimes in.

"It's ballast, Isabella, since you weigh less than 150 pounds."

"Oh." I flush.

"Do you have your hair tie from yesterday?" Edward asks.

I nod. "You want me to put my hair up?"

"Yes."

I quickly do as I'm asked.

"Climb in," Edward commands. He's still so bossy.

I make to get into the back.

"No, front. Pilot sits at the back."

"Oh… But won't you be able to see."

"I'll see plenty," he grins at me. I don't think I have ever seen him so happy. Bossy, but happy.

I clamber in, settling down into the leather seat on top of the ballast cushion. It is surprisingly comfortable. Edward leans over, pulls the harness over my shoulders, reaches between my legs for the lower belt, and slots it into the fastener that rests against my belly. He tightens all the restraining straps.

"Hmmm… you, in a harness… it's very hot," he whispers, and kisses me quickly. "This won't take long – twenty, thirty minutes at most. Thermals aren't great this time of the morning, but it's so breathtaking up there at this hour. You're not nervous or anything?"

"Excited." I beam at him. Where did this ridiculous grin come from? And actually, part of me is terrified... My inner goddess, she's under a blanket behind the sofa.

"Good." He grins back, stroking my face, then disappears from view. I can hear and feel him clambering into the back. Of course he's strapped me in so tightly I can't move around to see him… typical! We are very low on the ground. In front of me is a panel of dials and levers, and a big stick thing. I leave well alone.

Mark Benson appears, with a cheerful grin, as he checks my straps.

"First time?" he asks.

"Yes."

"You'll love it."

"Thanks, Mr. Benson."

"Call me Mark." He turns to Edward. "Okay?"

"Yep. Let's go."

I am so glad I haven't eaten anything. I am beyond excited. Once again, I am putting myself into this beautiful man's skilled hands. Mark shuts the cockpit lid, strolls over to the plane in front and climbs in.

The Piper's single propeller starts and my stomach relocates itself to my throat. Jeez, I'm really doing this. Mark taxis slowly down the runway, and as the cable takes the strain, we suddenly jolt forward… We're off. I can hear chatter over the radio set behind me. I think it's Mark talking to the tower, but I can't make out what he's saying. As the Piper picks up speed, so do we. It's very bumpy and in front of us the single prop plane is still on the ground. Jeez, will we ever get up? And suddenly, my stomach disappears from my throat and free-falls through my body to the ground – we're airborne.

"Here we go, baby!" Edward shouts from behind me.

And we are in our own bubble, just the two of us. I can hear the sound of the wind ripping past, and the distant hum of the Piper's engine. I'm aware that I am gripping the edge of my seat with both hands, so tightly my knuckles are going white. We head west, away from the rising sun, gaining height, crossing over fields and woods and homes and Normandy Boulevard… oh my. This is amazing. Above us, only sky. The light is extraordinary, diffuse and warm in hue, and I remember Jake rambling on about 'Magic Hour', a time of day that photographers adore. This is it, just after dawn, and I'm in it… with Edward. Abruptly, I'm reminded of Jake's show. Hmmm… I need to tell Edward. I wonder briefly how he'll react. But I won't worry about that... I'm enjoying the ride.

My ears pop as we gain height and the ground slips further and further away. It is so peaceful. I completely get why he likes to be up here, away from his BlackBerry and all that stuff.

The radio crackles into life, and I hear Mark mention 3,000 feet. Jeez, that sounds high. I can no longer clearly distinguish things on the ground.

"Release," I hear Edward say into the radio, and suddenly the Piper disappears, and the pulling sensation provided by the small plane ceases, and we're floating… Floating over Jacksonville… *Holy fuck, it's exciting*. The plane banks and turns as the wing dips and we spiral toward the sun. *Icarus, this is it…* I am flying close to the sun, but he's with me, leading me. I gasp at the realization. We spiral and spiral, and the view in this morning light is spectacular.

"Hold on tight!" he shouts, and we dip again, only this time he doesn't stop, and suddenly I am upside down, looking at the ground through the top of the cockpit. I squeal loudly, my arms automatically lashing out, my hands splayed on the Perspex to stop me falling, and I

can hear him laughing. *Bastard*… But his joy is infectious and I am laughing too as he rights the plane.

“I’m glad I didn’t have breakfast!” I shout at him.

“Yeah, in hindsight it’s good you didn’t, 'cause I’m going to do that again.”

He dips the plane once more until we are upside down. This time, because I’m prepared, I hang on to the harness, but it makes me grin and giggle like a fool. He levels the plane once more.

"Beautiful isn't it?" he calls.

"Yes."

And we fly, swopping majestically through the air. Oh my... Listening to the wind and the silence, in the early morning light. Who could ask for more?

“See the joy-stick in front of you?” he shouts again.

I look at the stick that is moving slightly between my legs. Oh no, where’s he going with this?

“Grab hold.”

Oh shit, he’s going to make me fly the plane… no!

“Go on, Isabella… grab it,” he urges more vehemently.

Tentatively, I grasp it and feel the pitch and yaw of what I assume are rudders and paddles or whatever keeps this thing in the air…

“Hold tight, keep it steady. See the middle dial in front? Keep the needle dead center.”

My heart is in my mouth. Holy shit, I am flying a glider. I am soaring.

“Good girl.” Edward sounds delighted.

“I am amazed you let me take control,” I shout back at him.

“You’d be amazed what I’d let you do, Miss Swan. Back to me now.”

I feel the joy-stick move suddenly and I let go as we spiral down some more, my ears starting to pop again. The ground is getting closer and it feels like we could be hitting it shortly. Jeez, that's scary.

"Herlong, this is Blanik glider N Papa 3 Alpha, entering left downwind runway 7 to the grass, Herlong." Jeez, he sounds like he knows what he's doing. The tower squawks back at him over the radio but I don't understand what they say. We sail around again in a wide circle, sinking slowly to the ground. I can see the airport, the landing strips, and we're flying back over Normandy Boulevard.

"Hang on, baby. This can get bumpy."

And after one more circle we dip and suddenly we are on the ground with a brief thump, and we're so low and close to it, racing along the grass – *holy shit* – until we finally come to a stop. I realize I have been holding my breath throughout the landing and I take a deep cleansing breath while Edward leans over and undoes the cockpit lid, then clambers out and stretches.

"How was that?" he asks and his eyes are shining a bright dazzling emerald green from his excitement. He leans down to unbuckle me.

"That was extraordinary… Thank you," I whisper.

"Was it more?" he asks softly.

"Much more…" I breathe and I lean over and kiss him.

Chapter 48

"Come." Edward holds out his hand for me and I clamber out of the cockpit. He grabs me and pulls me to him so I am flush against his body and suddenly his hand is in my hair, pulling it so my head tips back, and his other hand travels down to the base of my spine. Holding me tightly, he kisses me… long, hard, passionately, his tongue in my mouth. I can feel his breath mounting, his ardor, his erection… Holy crow, we're in a field, and my hands are twisting in his hair, anchoring him to me. I want him - here, now - on the ground. He breaks away and gazes down at me, his eyes dark and luminous in the early morning light.

“Breakfast,” he whispers and he makes it sound so erotic. How can he make bacon and eggs sound like forbidden fruit? It’s an extraordinary skill. He turns, clasping my hand and we head back to the car.

“What about the glider?”

“Someone will take care of that?” he says dismissively, but there’s a raw sensuality in his eyes now. Wow… he takes my breath away. “We’ll eat now.”

Food… he’s talking food, when really, all I want is him.

“Come.” He smiles.

I have never seen him like this. It is a joy to behold. I find myself walking beside him, hand-in-hand, with a stupid, goofy grin plastered on my face, like when I was ten and I spent the day in Disneyland with Charlie. It was a perfect day. And this is sure shaping out to be the same.

Back in the car, as we head back along Atlantic Boulevard, my phone alarm goes off. Oh yes, my pill.

“What’s that?” Edward asks, curious, glancing at me.

I fumble in my handbag for the packet.

“Alarm for my pill.” I flush.

His lips quirk up “Good, well done. I hate condoms.”

I flush some more. He's as patronizing as ever. Chris Martin is serenading us in the car now, Coldplay on the iPod.

“I like that you introduced me to Mark as your girlfriend,” I murmur.

“Isn’t that what you are?” He raises an eyebrow at me.

“Am I? I thought you wanted a submissive.”

“So did I, Isabella, and I do. But I’ve told you, I want more too.”

Holy crow… He’s coming around, and hope surges through me leaving me breathless.

"I'm very happy that you want more," I whisper.

"We aim to please, Miss Swan." He smirks as we pull into the International House of Pancakes.

"IHOP." I grin back at him. Who would have thought… Edward Cullen at IHOP.

It's 8:30, but quiet in the restaurant. It smells of sweet batter, fried food and disinfectant… *Hmmm, not such an enticing aroma*. Edward leads me to a booth.

"I would never have pictured you here," I say as we slide into a booth.

"My Dad used to bring us to one of these whenever my Mom went away on business. It was our secret." He smiles at me, green eyes dancing, then picks up a menu, running a hand through his wayward hair as he stares down at it. *Oh, I want to run my hands through that hair*. I pick up a menu and examine it; I realize I am starving.

"I know what I want," he breathes, his voice low and husky. I glance up at him and he's staring at me, in that way that tightens all the muscles in my belly and takes my breath away, his green eyes dark and smoldering. *Holy shit.* I gaze at him, my blood singing in my veins answering his call.

"I want what you want," I whisper.

He gasps quietly. "Here?" he asks suggestively, raising an eyebrow at me, smiling wickedly, his teeth trapping the tip of his tongue.

Oh my… sex in IHOP. His expression changes, growing darker.

"Don't bite your lip," he orders. "Not here, not now," his eyes harden momentarily and for a moment he looks so deliciously dangerous . "If I can't have you here, don't tempt me."

"Hi. My name's Leandra. What can I get for you… errr … folks… errr… today, this morning?" Her voice trails off, stumbling over her words, as she gets an eye full of Mr. Beautiful opposite me. She flushes scarlet and I feel a small ounce of sympathy for her, because he still does that to me. Her presence allows me to escape briefly from his sensual glare.

"Isabella?" he prompts me, ignoring her, and I don't think anyone could squeeze as much carnality into my name as he does at that moment. I swallow, praying that I don't go the same color as poor Leandra.

“I told you, I want what you want.” I keep my voice soft, low, and he looks at me hungrily. Jeez, my inner goddess swoons. *Am I up to this game?*

Leandra looks from me to him and back again. She’s practically the same color as her shiny red hair.

“Shall I give you guys another minute to decide?”

“No. We know what we want.” Edward’s mouth twitches with a small, sexy smile. “We’ll have two portions of the original buttermilk pancakes with maple syrup and bacon on the side, two glasses of orange juice, one black coffee with skim milk and one English breakfast tea, if you have it,” says Edward, not taking his eyes off me.

“Thank you, sir. Will that be all?” Leandra whispers, looking anywhere but at the two of us. We both turn to stare at her, and she flushes crimson again and scuttles away.

“You know, it’s really not fair.” I glance down at the formica table top, tracing a pattern in it with my index finger, trying to sound nonchalant.

“What’s not fair?”

“How you disarm people… women, me.”

“Do I disarm you?”

I snort. “All the time.”

“It’s just looks, Isabella,” he says mildly.

“No, Edward, it’s much more than that.”

His brow creases.

“You disarm me totally, Miss Swan. Your innocence, it cuts through all the crap.”

“Is that why you’ve changed your mind?”

“Changed my mind?”

“Yes, about … err… us?”

He strokes his chin thoughtfully with his long, skilled fingers.

"I don't think I've changed my mind, per se. We just need to re-define our parameters, re-draw our battle lines, if you will. We can make this work, I'm sure. I want you submissive in my playroom. I will punish you if you digress from the rules. Other than that, well, I think it's all up for discussion. Those are my requirements, Miss Swan. What say you to that?"

"So I get to sleep with you? In your bed?"

"Is that what you want?"

"Yes."

"I agree then. Besides, I sleep very well when you're in my bed. I had no idea." His brow creases.

"I was frightened you'd leave me if I didn't agree to all of it," I whisper.

"I'm not going anywhere, Isabella. Besides…" He trails off and after some thought, he adds, "We're following your advice, your definition: compromise. You emailed it to me. And so far, it's working for me."

"I love that you want more," I murmur shyly.

"I know."

"How do you know?"

"Trust me, I just do." He smirks at me. He's hiding something… *what?*

At that moment, Leandra arrives with breakfast. Our conversation ceases, and I remember how ravenous I am. Edward watches with annoying approval as I devour everything on my plate.

"Can I treat you?" I ask Edward.

"Treat me how?"

"Pay for this meal."

Edward snorts. "I don't think so," he scoffs.

"Please. I want to."

He frowns at me. "Are you trying to completely emasculate me?"

“This is probably the only place that I’ll be able to afford to pay.”

“Isabella, I appreciate the thought. I do. But no.”

I purse my lips.

“Don’t scowl,” he threatens, his eyes glinting ominously.

Of course he doesn’t ask me for my mother’s address, he knows it already, stalker that he is. When he pulls up outside the house, I don’t comment. What’s the point?

“Do you want to come in?” I ask shyly.

“I need to work, Isabella, but I’ll be back this evening. What time?”

I can’t help but feel a stab of disappointment. Why do I want to spend every single minute with this controlling sex god? Oh yes… I love him. And he can fly.

“Thank you, for the more.”

“My pleasure, Isabella.” He kisses me, and I inhale his sweet Edward smell.

“I’ll see you later.”

“Try and stop me,” he whispers.

I climb out and he drives off into the Florida sunshine. I’m still wearing his sweatshirt and his underwear, and I’m too warm.

In the kitchen my mom is in a complete flap. It’s not every day she has to entertain a multi-zillionaire and it’s stressing her out.

“How are you, darling?” she asks and I flush, because she must know what I was doing last night.

“I’m good. Edward took me gliding this morning.” I hope the new information will distract her.

“Gliding? In a small plane with no engine? That sort of gliding?”

I nod.

"Wow…"

She's speechless – a novel concept for my mother. She stares at me, but eventually recovers herself and resumes her original line of questioning.

"How was last night? Did you talk?"

Jeez, I think I flush bright scarlet.

"We talked, last night, and today. It's getting better."

"Good." She turns her attention back to the four cookery books she has open on the kitchen table.

"Mom, if you like, I'll cook this evening."

"Oh honey, would you? You know what a dreadful cook I am."

I grimace at her, knowing full well that I couldn't subject Edward to her cooking. Jeez, I wouldn't subject anyone to her cooking, even - who do I hate? oh yes - Mrs. Robinson - Irina. Will I ever meet this damned woman?

I decide to send a quick thank-you to Edward.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Soaring as opposed to sore-ing…
Date: 4 June 2009 10:20 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Sometimes… you really know how to show a girl a good time.
Thank you
Bella x

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Soaring vs sore-ing…
Date: 4 June 2009 10:24 EST
To: Isabella Swan

I'll take either of those over your snoring…
I had a good time too. But I always do when I'm with you.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: SNORING
Date: 4 June 2009 10:26 EST
To: Edward Cullen

I DO NOT SNORE.
And if I do, it's very ungallant of you to point it out.
You are no gentleman, Mr. Cullen!
Bella

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Somniloquy
Date: 4 June 2009 10:28 EST
To: Isabella Swan

I have never claimed to be a gentleman, Isabella, and I think I have demonstrated that point to you on numerous occasions. I am not intimidated by your SHOUTY capitals. But I will confess to a small white lie: No – you don't snore, but you do talk. And it's fascinating.

What happened to my kiss?

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

Holy shit. I know I talk in my sleep. My mother has told me enough times. What the hell have I said… Oh no.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Spill the Beans

Date: 4 June 2009 10:32 EST
To: Edward Cullen

You are a scoundrel – definitely no gentleman.
So… what did I say?

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Somniloquy
Date: 4 June 2009 10:35 EST
To: Isabella Swan

Well, it would be most ungallant of me to say, and I have already been chastised for that.
But if you behave yourself, I may tell you this evening.
I do have to go into a meeting now.
Laters baby.

Edward Cullen
CEO & Scoundrel, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

Right… I shall maintain radio silence until this evening.

Jeez, supposing I've said I hate him, or worse still, that I love him, in my sleep. Oh, I hope not. I am not ready to tell him that, and I'm sure he's not ready to hear it. If he ever wants to hear it. I scowl at my computer and decide that I will make bread, whatever I cook.

I have decided on my Phoenix staple, transferred to Florida. Gazpacho soup and a barbecue, with steaks marinated in olive oil, garlic, and lemon. Edward likes meat, and it's simple to do, and Phil has volunteered to man the BBQ. What is it about men and fire, I ponder, as my mother trails after me through the supermarket with the shopping cart. Honestly, how she ever managed when I was little I have no idea. As we browse the meat counter, my phone rings. I scramble for it, thinking it may be Edward. I don't recognize the number.

"Hello?" I answer breathlessly.

"Isabella Swan?"

"Yes."

"Oh good. It's Victoria Morgan from SIP."

"Oh -- hi…" *Oh my.*

"Yes. We'd like to offer you the job of intern to Mr. James Smith, starting on Monday."

"Oh… wow… that's great. Thank you!"

"You know the salary details?"

"Yes… yes… that's – I mean - I accept your offer. I'd love to come and work for you."

"Excellent. We'll see you Monday at eight thirty?"

"Yes, see you then. Goodbye. And thank you."

I beam at my mom.

"You have a job?"

I nod gleefully, and she hugs me, in the middle of Publix supermarket.

"Congratulations, darling! We have to buy some champagne!" She's clapping her hands and jumping up and down… is she forty-two or twelve?

I glance down at my phone and frown, there's a missed call. From Edward, and he never phones me! I call him straight back.

"Isabella," he answers immediately.

"Hi," I murmur shyly.

"I have to go back to Seattle. Something's come up. I am on my way to St. Augustine now. Please apologize to your mother -- I can't make dinner." He sounds very businesslike.

"Oh… nothing serious, I hope?"

"I have to take care of a situation. I'll see you Friday. I'll send Taylor to collect you from the airport if I can't come myself." He sounds… cold. Angry, even. But for the first time, I don't immediately think it's me.

"Oh… okay. I hope you sort out your situation. Have a safe flight."

"You too, baby," he breathes, and with those words my Edward is back briefly. Then he hangs up.

Oh no. The last ‘situation’ he had was my virginity. Jeez, I hope it’s nothing like that. I gaze at my ,om. Her earlier jubilation has metamorphosed into concern.

“It’s Edward, he’s had to go back to Seattle. He apologizes.”

“Oh! That’s a shame, darling. Well, we can still have our barbecue, and now we have something to celebrate - your new job! You have to tell me all about it.”

Late afternoon and Mom and I are lying beside the pool. My mother has relaxed to the point where she is, literally, horizontal, now that Mr. Megabucks is not coming to dinner. As I lie in the sun, desperately endeavoring to get some color, I think about yesterday evening, and breakfast today. I think about Edward. I still can’t get rid of my ridiculous grin. It keeps creeping across my face, unbidden and disconcerting, as I recall our various conversations, what we did, what he did.

There seems to be tidal shift in Edward’s attitude. He denies it, but he admits he’s trying for more. What could have changed? What has altered since he sent his long email and when I saw him yesterday. What has he done? I sit up suddenly, almost spilling my Dr. Pepper. He had dinner with ***her***. Irina.

Holy Fuck!

My scalp prickles at the realization. Did she say something to him? Oh, to have been a fly on the wall during their dinner. I could have landed in her soup, or on her wine glass or something.

“What is it Bella, honey?” Mom asks, startled from her torpor.

“I’m just having a moment, Mom. What time is it?”

“About 6_30, darling.”

Hmmm, he won’t have landed yet. Can I ask him? Should I ask him? Or perhaps she has nothing to do with it. I fervently hope so. Maybe I said something in my sleep. Crap, an unguarded remark, while dreaming about him, maybe? Well, whatever it is, or was, I hope the sea change is coming from within him.

I am sweltering in this damned heat. I need another dip in the pool.

As I ready for bed, I switch on my computer. I have heard nothing from Edward. Not even a word that he's arrived safely.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Safe Arrival
Date: 4 June 2009 22:32 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Sir
Please let me know that you have arrived safely.
I am starting to worry.
Thinking of you.
Your
Bella. x

-

Three minutes later, I hear the ping from my email inbox.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Apologies
Date: 4 June 2009 19:36
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan
I have arrived safely and please accept my apologies for not letting you know.
I do not want to cause you any worry, it's heart warming to know that you care for me.
I am thinking of you too and as ever looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: The Situation
Date: 4 June 2009 22:40 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen
I think it is very evident that I care for you deeply.
How could you doubt that?
I hope your 'situation' is in hand.
Your
Bella x
PS: Are you going to tell me what I said in my sleep?

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Pleading the Fifth
Date: 4 June 2009 19:45
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan
I like, very much, that you care for me. The 'situation' here is slowing being resolved.
With regard to your PS: The answer is - No.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Pleading Insanity
Date: 4 June 2009 22:48 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Well… I hope it was amusing.
But you should know I cannot accept any responsibility for what comes out of my mouth when I am not conscious.
In fact, you probably misheard me. A man of your advanced years is surely to suffer a little deafness.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Pleading guilty
Date: 4 June 2009 19:52
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan
Sorry, could you speak up? I can't hear you.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Pleading Insanity Again
Date: 4 June 2009 22:54 EST
To: Edward Cullen

You are driving me crazy.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tormentor
Date: 4 June 2009 19:59
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Miss Swan
I intend to do exactly that on Friday evening, in my playroom.
Looking forward to it ;)

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Grrrrrr
Date: 4 June 2009 23:02 EST
To: Edward Cullen

I am officially pissed at you.
Goodnight.
Miss I M Swan

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Wild Cat
Date: 4 June 2009 20:05
To: Isabella Swan

Are you growling at me, Miss Swan?
I possess a cat of my own for growlers.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

Cat of his own? I've never seen a cat in his apartment. No, I am not going to answer him. Oh, he can be so exasperating sometimes. Fifty shades of exasperating. I clamber into bed and lie staring up as I wait for my eyes to adjust to the light. I hear another ping from my computer. I am not going to look. No, definitely not. No, I am not going to look… gah! Like the fool I am, I cannot resist the lure of Edward Cullen's words.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: What you said in your sleep
Date: 4 June 2009 20.20
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella
I'd rather hear you say the words that you uttered in your sleep when you're conscious, that's why I won't tell you.
Go to sleep. You'll need to be rested with what I have in mind for you tomorrow.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

Oh no… it's as bad as I think, I'm sure.

Chapter 49

My mother hugs me tightly.

“Follow your heart, darling and please, please, try not to over-think things. Relax and enjoy. You are so young, sweetheart, you have so much to experience, just let it happen. You deserve the best of everything.” Her words are soft and comforting in my ear. She kisses my hair gently.

“Oh, Mom.” Hot unwelcome tears prick my eyes, dry and sore from the air-conditioning in the terminal building, as I cling to her.

“Darling, you know what they say, you have to kiss a lot of frogs before you find your Prince.”

I give her a lopsided, bittersweet smile. “I think I’ve kissed a Prince, Mom, I just hope he doesn’t turn into a frog.” She gives me her most endearing-motherly-absolute-unconditional-love smile, and I marvel at the love I feel for this woman, as we hug again.

“Bella, they’re calling your flight,” Phil’s voice is anxious.

“Will you visit, Mom?”

“Of course darling – soon. Love you.”

"Me too."

Her eyes are red with unshed tears as she releases me. I hate leaving her. I hug Phil, and turning head to the gate. I do not have time for the first class lounge today and I will myself not to glance back, but I do… and Phil is holding my Mom, and tears are streaming down her face. I can no longer hold mine back. I put my head down and proceed to the gate, keeping my eyes on the blurry, shiny white floor.

Once on board, back in the luxury of first class, I curl up in my seat and try and compose myself. It is always painful to wrench myself away from Mom. She is scatty, disorganized but newly insightful, and she loves me. Unconditional love, what every child deserves from its parents. I frown at my wayward thoughts, and pulling out my BlackBerry, stare at it despondently. What does Edward know of love? Seems he didn’t get the unconditional love he was entitled to during his very early years. My heart twists, and my mother’s words waft like a zephyr through my mind: *Yes, Bella. Hell, what do you need? A neon sign flashing on his forehead?* She thinks Edward loves me, but then she’s my mother, of course she’d think that. She thinks I deserve the best of everything. And then I have a eureka moment, a moment of startling clarity. It’s very simple: I want his love. I *need* Edward Cullen to love me. This is why I am so reticent about our relationship – because on some basic, fundamental level, I recognize within me a deep-seated compulsion to be loved, and cherished. And because of his unique... Edwardness, his fifty shades, I am holding myself back. The BDSM is a distraction from the real issue. The sex is amazing, he’s wealthy, he’s beautiful, but this is all meaningless without his love, and the real heart-fail is that I don’t know if he’s capable of love. He doesn’t even love himself. I remember his self-loathing, ***her*** love being the only form he found *acceptable*. Punished – whipped, beaten, whatever their relationship entailed – he feels undeserving of love. Why does he feel like that? How can he feel like that? His words come back to haunt me, *"It’s very hard to grow up in a perfect family when you’re not perfect.”*

I close my eyes, imagining his pain. I can’t even comprehend it. I shudder as I remember that I may have divulged too much. What have I confessed to Edward in my sleep? What secrets have I revealed?

I stare at the BlackBerry in the vague hope that it will give me some answers. Rather unsurprisingly, it is not very forthcoming. As we haven’t taken off yet, I decide to email my Fifty Shades.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Homeward Bound
Date: 5 June 2009 12:53 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen
I am once again ensconced in first class, for which I thank you. I am looking forward to seeing you this evening, and perhaps torturing the truth out of you about my nocturnal admissions.
Your
Bella x

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Homeward Bound
Date: 5 June 2009 09.58
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella
I am counting the minutes.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

His response makes me frown. It sounds clipped and formal, not his usual witty, pithy style.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Homeward Bound
Date: 5 June 2009 13:01 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Dearest Mr. Cullen
I hope everything is okay… re 'the situation.'
The tone of your email is… worrying.
Bella x

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Homeward Bound
Date: 5 June 2009 10.04
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella
The situation could be better. I look forward to seeing you. Have you taken off yet? If so you should not be emailing. You are putting yourself at risk, in direct contravention of the rule regarding your personal safety. I meant what I said about punishments.

Yours

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

Crap… okay. Jeez. What is eating him? Perhaps 'the situation'… maybe Taylor's gone AWOL, maybe he's dropped a few million on the stock market – whatever the reason…

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Over-Reaction
Date: 5 June 2009 13:06 EST
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Grumpy
The aircraft doors are still open. We are delayed, but only by ten minutes. My welfare and that of the passengers around me is vouchsafed. You may stow your twitchy palm for now.
Miss Swan

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Apologies
Date: 5 June 2009 10.08
To: Isabella Swan

I miss you and your smart mouth, Miss Swan. I want you safely home.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Apology Accepted
Date: 5 June 2009 13:10 EST
To: Edward Cullen

They are shutting the doors. You won't hear another peep from me, especially given your slight deafness.
Laters.
Bella x

-

I switch off the BlackBerry, unable to shake the anxiety I feel. Something is up with Edward. Perhaps 'the situation' is out of hand. I sit back, glancing up at the locker where my bags are stowed. I managed this morning, with my mother's help, to buy Edward a small gift, to say thank you, for first class and for the gliding. I smile at the memory of the soaring - that was something else. I don't know if I'll give it to him. He might think it's childish – and if he's in a strange mood, maybe not. I am both eager to return and apprehensive of what awaits me at my journey's end. As I mentally flick through all the scenarios that could be 'the situation', I'm vaguely aware that once again the only empty seat is beside me. I shake my head as the thought crosses my mind that Edward might have purchased the adjacent seat so that I couldn't talk to anyone... I dismiss the idea as ridiculous. No one could be that controlling, surely. I close my eyes as the plane taxis towards the runway.

I emerge into the Sea Tac arrivals hall at 5:35 pm, eight hours later, to find Taylor waiting – holding up a board that reads *Miss I Swan. Honestly!* But it's good to see him.

"Hello, Taylor."

"Miss Swan," he greets me formally, but I can see a hint of smile in his sharp blue eyes. He looks his usual immaculate self, smart charcoal suit, white shirt and charcoal tie.

"I do know what you look like Taylor, you don't need a board... and I do wish you'd call me Bella."

"Bella. Can I take your cases, please?"

“No, I can manage. Thank you.”

His lips tighten perceptibly.

“But, if you’d be more comfortable taking them...” I stammer.

“Thank you, Bella.” He grabs both my back-pack and wheelie case. “This way, ma’am.”

I sigh, years of ingrained training on his part no doubt, and I remember, though I would like to erase it from my memory, that this man has bought me underwear. In fact – and the thought unsettles me – he’s the only man who’s ever bought me underwear. Even Charlie's never had to endure that hardship. We walk in silence to the black Mercedes SUV outside in the airport parking lot, and he holds the door open for me. I clamber in wondering if wearing such a short skirt for the return to Seattle was a good idea. It was cool and welcome in Florida. Here, I feel… exposed. Once Taylor has stowed my cases in the trunk we set off for 4th Avenue.

The journey is slow, caught up in rush hour traffic. Taylor keeps his cool blue eyes on the road ahead. Taciturn does not begin to describe him.

I can bear the silence no longer. “How’s Edward, Taylor?”

“Mr. Cullen is… preoccupied, Miss Swan.”

Oh… this must be ‘the situation.’ I am mining a seam of gold.

“Preoccupied?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

I frown at Taylor, and he glances at me in the rear-view mirror… our eyes meet. He’s saying no more. Jeez, he can be as tightlipped as the control freak himself.

“Is he okay?”

“I believe so, Ma’am.”

“Are you more comfortable calling me Miss Swan?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

“Oh… okay.”

Well, that curtails our conversation, and we continue in silence. I begin to think that Taylor's recent slip, when he told me that Edward had been hell on wheels, was an anomaly. Perhaps he's embarrassed about it, worried that he's been disloyal.

The silence is suffocating.

"Could you put some music on please?"

"Certainly, ma'am. What would you like to hear?"

"Something soothing."

I see a smile play on Taylor's lips as our eyes meet briefly again in the mirror.

"Yes, ma'am."

He pushes a few buttons on the steering wheel and the gentle strains of Pachelbel's canon fills the space between us. *Oh yes,* this is what I need.

"Thank you," I breathe, and I lie back as we drive slowly but steadily along the I-5 into Seattle.

Twenty-five minutes later he drops me outside the impressive façade that is the entrance to Escala.

"In you go, Ma'am," he says, holding the door open for me. "I'll bring up your case and backpack." His expression is soft, warm… avuncular. Jeez, Uncle Taylor, what a thought.

"Okay. Thank you for collecting me."

"It's a pleasure, Miss Swan." A small smile plays on his lips again. I head into the building. The doorman nods and waves.

As I ride up to the sixtieth floor I feel a thousand butterflies stretch their wings and flutter erratically in my stomach. *Why am I so nervous?* And I know it's because I have no idea what kind of mood Edward's going to be in when I arrive. My inner goddess is hopeful for one type of mood. My subconscious, like me, is fraught with nerves.

The elevator doors open and I'm in the foyer. It is so strange not to be met by Taylor. Of course, he's parking the car. I go through the double doors and into the great room. Edward is on his BlackBerry talking quietly as he stares out of the great windows at the early evening Seattle skyline. He's wearing a grey suit with the jacket undone and he's running

his hand through his hair. I can tell he's agitated, tense even. *Oh no – what's wrong?* But he's still beyond beautiful. How can he look so… arresting? It's such a pleasure to stand and drink in the sheer sight of him.

"No trace… Okay… Yes." He turns and sees me, and his whole demeanor changes, from tension through relief to something else. A look that calls directly to my inner goddess. A look of sensual carnality, green eyes blazing. My mouth goes dry and desire blooms in my body… *whoa.*

"Keep me informed," he snaps and shuts off his phone as he strides purposefully towards me. I stand paralyzed as he closes the distance between us, devouring me with his eyes. *Holy shit.* Something's amiss. The strain in his jaw, the anxiety around his eyes. He shrugs out of his jacket, undoes his dark tie, and slings them both on to the couch en route to me, and then his arms are wrapped around me and he's pulling me to him, hard, fast, gripping my ponytail to tilt my head up, kissing me, like his life depends on it. *What the hell*? He drags the hair tie painfully out of my hair, but I don't care. There's a desperate, primal quality to his kiss. He needs me, at this point in time, for whatever reason. I have never felt so… desired, coveted, and it's dark and sensual and alarming all at the same time, and I am kissing him back with equal fervor, my fingers twisting and fisting in his hair. Our tongues entwined, our passion and ardor erupting between us. He tastes divine, hot, sexy, and his scent, all body wash and Edward. *Oh my.* He drags his mouth away from mine and he's staring down at me, gripped by some unnamed emotion.

"What's wrong?" I breathe.

"I'm so glad you're back. Shower with me – now." I can't work out if it's a request or a command.

"Yes," I whisper, and he grabs my hand, leading me out of the big room into his bedroom to the ensuite. In the bathroom he releases me and switches on the four-person shower, turning slowly he gazes at me, eyes hooded.

"I like your skirt. It's very short," he says, his voice low. "You have great legs." He steps out of his shoes and reaches down to take each of his socks off. He never takes his eyes off me.

I am rendered speechless by the look of hunger in his eyes. *Wow, to be this wanted…* by this Greek god. I mirror his actions and step out of my black pumps. He reaches for me suddenly and he's backing me up against the wall. Kissing me, my face, my throat, my lips, running his hands into my hair. I feel the cool, smooth tiled wall at my back as he pushes himself against me so that I'm flattened between his heat and the cold of the ceramic. Tentatively, I place my arms on his upper arms and he groans as I squeeze tightly.

"I want you now… here… fast, hard," he breathes and his hands are on my thighs, pushing up my skirt. "Are you still bleeding?"

"No." I flush.

"Good," he breathes.

And his thumbs hook over my white cotton panties, suddenly he drops to his knees as he pulls them off me. My skirt is now rucked up so that I'm naked from the waist down and panting, wanting. He grabs my hips, pushing me against the wall again, and kisses me at the apex of my thighs. His hands grab my upper thighs, forcing my legs apart slightly. I groan loudly and I can feel his tongue, oh my, circling my clitoris. I tip my head back involuntarily and moan as my fingers find their way into this hair. His tongue is relentless… strong, insistent, laving me, swirling around and around, again and again, non-stop. It's exquisite, the intensity of feeling – almost painful. I can feel myself quickening, and he releases me. *What? No!* My breathing is ragged, I am panting, and he grabs my face with both hands, holding me firmly, and he kisses me hard, thrusting his tongue into my mouth so I can taste my arousal. He unzips his fly and he frees himself, then grabs the backs of my thighs and lifts me.

"Wrap your legs around me, baby," he commands, his voice urgent, strained.

I do as I'm told and wrap my arms around his neck and he moves quickly and sharply, filling me. He gasps, and I groan. He holds my behind, his fingers digging into my soft flesh, as he begins to move, slowly at first – a steady even tempo. But as his control unravels, he speeds up, faster, and faster… *Ahhh!* I tip my head back and concentrate on the invading, punishing, heavenly sensation… pushing me, pushing me… onward, higher, up, and when I can take no more, I explode around him, spiraling into an intense, all-consuming orgasm. He lets go with a deep growl, and he buries his head in my neck as he buries himself inside me, groaning loudly as he finds his release.

His breathing is erratic, but he kisses me tenderly, not moving, still inside me, and I blink, unseeing, into his eyes. As he comes into focus, very gently he pulls out of me, holding me steady while I put my feet on the floor. The bathroom is now cloudy with steam and hot. I feel overdressed.

"Well, you seem pleased to see me," I murmur with a shy smile.

His lips quirk up. "Yes, Miss Swan, I think my pleasure is pretty self-evident. Come, let me get you in the shower." He undoes the next three buttons of his shirt, removes the cufflinks, then tugs it over his head and discards it on the floor. Removing his suit pants and boxers, he kicks them to one side and begins to undo the buttons on my blouse while I watch him, yearning to reach out and stroke his chest, but I contain myself.

“How was your journey?” he asks mildly. He seems so much calmer now, his apprehension gone… dissolved by sexual congress.

“Fine, thank you,” I murmur, still breathless. “Thanks once again for first class. It really is a much nicer way to travel.” I smile shyly at him. “I have some news,” I add nervously.

“Oh?” he looks down at me as he undoes the last button, slips my blouse down my arms, and throws it on top of his discarded clothes.

“I have a job.”

He stills and smiles at me – his eyes warm and soft. “Congratulations, Miss Swan. Now will you tell me where?” he teases gently.

“You don’t know?”

He shakes his head, frowning slightly. “Why would I know?”

“Well, with your stalking capabilities I thought you might have…” I trail off as his face falls.

“Isabella, I wouldn’t dream of interfering in your career. Unless you ask me to, of course.” He looks… wounded.

“So you have no idea which company?”

“No. I know there are four publishing companies in Seattle, so I am assuming it’s one of them.”

“S.I.P.”

“Oh, the small one, good. Well done.” He leans forward and kisses my forehead. “Clever girl. When do you start?”

“Monday.”

“That soon, eh? I’d better take advantage of you while I still can. Turn around.”

I am thrown by his casual command, but do as I’m bid and he undoes my bra and unzips my skirt. He pushes my skirt down, cupping my behind as he does, and kissing my shoulder. He leans against me and his nose nuzzles my hair, inhaling deeply. He squeezes my buttocks.

"You intoxicate me, Miss Swan… and you calm me. Such a heady combination." He kisses my hair quickly, then pulls away, grabbing my hand and tugging me into the shower.

"Ow," I squeal. The water is practically scalding. Edward grins down at me as the water cascades over him.

"It's only a little hot water."

And actually, he's right. It feels heavenly. Washing the sticky Florida morning off me and the stickiness from our lovemaking.

"Turn around," he orders, and I comply, turning to face the wall. "I want to wash you," he murmurs, and I see him reach for the bodywash and squirt some in his hands.

"I have something else to tell you," I murmur as his hands start on my shoulders.

"Oh, yes?" he asks mildly.

I steel myself with a deep breath. "My friend Jake's photography show is opening Thursday, in Portland."

He stills, his hands hovering over my breasts. I have emphasized the word 'friend.' "Yes, what about it?" he asks sternly.

"Well, I said I would go. Do you want to come with me?"

After what feels like a monumental amount of time, he slowly starts washing me again.

"What time?"

"The opening is at 7:30."

He kisses my ear. "Okay."

Inside, my subconscious relaxes and collapses, slumped into an old battered armchair.

"Were you nervous about asking me?"

"Yes, how can you tell?"

"Isabella, your whole body's just relaxed," he says dryly.

"Well, you just seem to be… errr… on the jealous side."

"Yes, I am," he says darkly. "And you'd do well to remember that. But thank you for asking. We'll take Echo Charlie."

Oh, the helicopter, of course. Silly me. More flying… cool! I grin.

"Can I wash you?" I ask.

"I don't think so," he murmurs, and he kisses me gently on my neck to take the sting out of his refusal.

I pout at the wall as he caresses my back with soap.

"Will you ever let me touch you?" I ask boldly.

He stills again, his hand on my behind.

"Put your hands on the wall, Isabella. I'm going to take you again," he murmurs in my ear, as he grabs my hips and I know that the discussion is over.

Later, we are seated at the breakfast bar, dressed in bathrobes, having consumed Mrs. Cope's rather excellent pasta alle vongole.

"More wine?" Edward asks, green eyes glowing.

"A small glass, please." The Sancerre is crisp and delicious.

Edward pours one for me and one for himself.

"How's the err… situation that bought you to Seattle?" I ask tentatively.

He frowns. "Out of hand," he murmurs bitterly. "But nothing for you to worry about, Isabella. I have plans for you this evening."

"Oh..?"

"Yes. I want you ready and waiting in my playroom in fifteen minutes."

Chapter 50

He stands and gazes down at me.

"You can get ready in your room. Incidentally, the walk-in closet is now full of clothes for you. I don't want any arguments about them." He narrows his eyes at me then stalks off to his study.

Me! Argue? With you, Fifty Shades…? It's more than my backside's worth. I sit on the bar stool momentarily stupefied trying to assimilate this morsel of information. He's bought me clothes… I roll my eyes in an exaggerated fashion, knowing full well he can't see me. Car, phone, computer… clothes, it'll be a damn condo next… and then I really will be his mistress. *Ho…!* my subconscious has her snarky face on. I ignore her and make my way upstairs towards *my* room…so it is still mine… why? I thought he'd agreed to let me sleep with him. I suppose he's not used to sharing his personal space… well neither am I. I console myself with the thought that at least I have somewhere to get away from him… I

check the door, it has a lock but no key… I shall ask Mrs Cope about that. I open the closet door, then close it again very quickly. It resembles Rose's… so many clothes hanging neatly on the rails… *Holy Crap – he's spent a fortune*. And I know that they will all fit. But I have no time to think about that -- I have to get kneeling -- in the Red Room of … pain… or pleasure, hopefully, this evening…

I kneel by the door, naked except for my panties. My heart is in my mouth. Jeez… I thought after the bathroom he would have had enough. This man is insatiable… or maybe all men are like him… I realize in that moment I have no idea… no comparisons. I close my eyes, trying to calm myself down, to connect with my inner sub. She's there somewhere, hiding behind my inner goddess… Anticipation runs bubbling like soda through my veins. What will he do? I take a deep steadying breath… but I cannot deny it, I am beyond excited. I feel wet already. This is so… I want to think*wrong*... but somehow it's not. It's right for Edward. It's what he wants – and after the last few days… after all he's done… I have to man up, and take whatever he decides he wants, whatever he thinks he needs. The memory of his look when I came in this evening, the longing in his face, his determined stride towards me… like I was an oasis in the desert. I'd do almost anything to see that look again. I press my thighs together at the delicious memory, and it reminds me that I need to spread my knees. I shuffle them apart. How long will he make me wait? The wait is crippling me… crippling me with a dark and tantalizing desire. I glance quickly round the subtly lit room; the cross, the table, the couch, the bench… that bed. It looms so large and it's made up with red satin sheets… Which piece of apparatus will he use?

The door opens and Edward breezes in, ignoring me completely. I glance down quickly, staring at my hands, positioned with care on my spread thighs.

Placing something on the large chest beside the door he strolls casually towards the bed. I indulge myself in a quick glimpse at him and my heart almost lurches to a stop. He's naked except for those soft ripped jeans, top button casually undone… jeez, he looks so freaking hot. My subconscious is frantically fanning herself and my inner goddess is swaying and writhing to some primal carnal rhythm. She's so ready… I lick my lips instinctively. Oh my… I feel my blood pound through my body… thick, dull… heavy with salacious hunger. *What is he going to do to me?*

He turns and nonchalantly walks back to the chest of drawers. Opening one he begins to remove items and place them on the top. My curiosity burns, blazes, but I resist the overwhelming temptation to sneak a quick peek. He finishes what he's doing and comes to stand in front of me… I can see his naked feet… and I want to kiss every inch of them. Run my tongue over his instep… suck each of his toes… *Holy shit*...

"You look lovely," he breathes.

I keep my head down, conscious that he's staring at me, while I am practically naked. I can feel the flush as it slowly spreads over my face. He bends down and cups my chin, forcing my face up to meet his gaze.

"You are one beautiful woman Isabella. And you're all mine," he murmurs. "Stand up." His command is soft full of sensual promise.

Shakily I get to my feet.

"Look at me," he breathes and I stare up into his smoldering green gaze. It is his Dom gaze… cold, hard… sexy as hell, seven shades of sin in one enticing look. My mouth goes dry and I know I will do anything he asks. An almost cruel smile plays across his lips.

"We don't have a signed contract Isabella. But we've discussed limits. And I want to re-iterate we have safe words… okay?"

Holy fuck… what has he got planned, that I need safe words?

"What are they?" he asks authoritatively

I frown slightly at his question and his face hardens perceptibly.

"What are the safe words, Isabella?" he says slowly and deliberately.

"Yellow…" I mumble.

"And?" he prompts, his mouth setting in a hard line.

"Red," I breathe.

"Remember those."

And I can't help it… I raise my eyebrow at him, and am about to remind him of my GPA but the sudden frosty glint in his green eyes stops me in my tracks.

"Don't start with your smart mouth in here, Miss Swan. Or I Will Fuck It With You On Your Knees. Do you understand?"

I swallow instinctively. Okay… and I blink rapidly, chastened. Actually… it's his tone of voice, rather than the threat, that intimidates me.

"Well?"

"Yes, Sir," I mumble hastily.

“Good girl,” he pauses as he stares at me. “My intention is not that you should safe-word because you're in pain… what I intend to do to you, will be intense. Very intense… and you have to guide me. Do you understand?”

Not really… Intense…? fuck…

“This is about touch Isabella. You will not be able to see me or hear me. But you’ll be able to feel me.”

I frown - *not hear him?* How is that going to work? He turns, and I hadn’t noticed that above the chest is a sleek, flat, matt-black box. As he waves his hand in front the box splits in half: two doors slide open revealing a CD player and a host of buttons. Edward presses several of these buttons in sequence. Nothing happens, but he seems satisfied. I am mystified. When he turns to face me again he wears his small I-have-a-secret smile.

“I am going to tie you to that bed Isabella. But I’m going to blindfold you first and…” he holds up his hands and he has his iPod in his hand… “You will not be able to hear me. All you will hear is the music I am going to play for you.”

Okay… a musical interlude…not what I was expecting. Does he ever do what I expect? Jeez… I hope it’s not rap.

“Come.” He takes my hand and leads me over to the antique four-poster bed. There are shackles attached at each corner… fine metal chains with leather cuffs, glinting against the red satin.

Oh boy... I think my heart is going to leave my chest... And I’m melting from the inside out… desire coursing through me. Could I be any more excited?

“Stand here.”

I am facing the bed. He leans down and whispers in my ear. “Wait here, keep your eyes on the bed. Picture yourself lying here bound and totally at my mercy.”

Oh my...

He moves away for a moment and I can hear him near the door... fetching something. All my senses are hyper alert, my hearing more acute. He's picked up something from the rack of whips and paddles by the door... *Holy cow...what is he going to do?*

I can feel him behind me. He takes my hair and pulls it into a pony tail behind me... And starts to plait it

“While I like your pigtails Isabella, I am too impatient to be at you right now. So one will have to do.” His voice is low, soft. His deft fingers skim my back occasionally as they work down my hair and each casual touch is like a sweet electric shock against my skin. He fastens the end with a hair tie, then gently tugs the plait, so that I forced to step back flush against him. He pulls again, to the side, so that I angle my head, giving him easier access to my neck. Leaning down he nuzzles my neck... Tracing his teeth and tongue from the base of my ear to my shoulder... He hums softly as he does and the sound resonates through me... Right down... Right down *There!*... at my core... Unbidden I groan quietly.

“Hush now,” he breathes against my skin.

He holds up his hands in front of me, his arms touching mine. In his right hand is a flogger. I remember the name from my first introduction to this room.

“Touch it,” he whispers... Oh my… he sounds like the devil himself, and my body flames in response. I tentatively reach out and brush the long strands... it has many long fronds, all soft suede with small beads at the end.

“I will use this. It will not hurt, but it will bring your blood to the surface of your skin, and make you very sensitive.”

Oh… he says it won’t hurt.

“What are the safe words, Isabella?”

“Err… yellow and red, Sir,” I whisper.

“Good girl. Remember, most of your fear is in your mind.”

He drops the flogger on the bed and his hands move to my waist.

“You won’t be needing these,” he murmurs and he hooks his fingers into my panties and sweeps them down my legs. I step unsteadily out of them, supporting myself on the ornate post of the bed.

“Stand still,” he orders and he kisses my behind and then gently nips me twice, making me tense. “Now lie down. Face up,” he adds as he smacks me hard on the behind. It makes me jump, and hastily I crawl on to the bed’s hard unyielding mattress and lie down looking up at him. The satin of the sheet beneath me is soft and cool against my skin. His gaze is impassive, except for his eyes, which glow with a barely leashed excitement.

“Hands above your head,” he orders.

And I do as I’m bid… jeez… my body hungers for him… I want him already.

He turns, and out of the corner of my eye, I watch him saunter back over to the chest of drawers, returning with the iPod and what looks like an eye mask… like the one I had on my flight to Atlanta. The thought makes me want to smile… but I can't quite make my lips cooperate into a grin… I am too… consumed with anticipation. I just know my face is completely immobile, my eyes huge, as I gaze at him.

He sits down on the edge of the bed and shows me the iPod. It has a strange antenna device as well headphones. How odd... I frown as I try to figure this out.

"This transmits what's playing on the iPod to the system in the room." Edward answers my unspoken query as he taps the small antenna. "I can hear what you're hearing, and I have a remote control unit, for it." He smirks slightly, his private-joke smile, and holds up a small flat device that looks like a very hip calculator. He leans across me, inserting the earbuds gently into my ears, and puts the iPod down somewhere on the bed above my head.

"Lift your head," he commands and I do so immediately.

Slowly he slides the mask on, pulling the elastic over the back of my head. I can now see nothing… the elastic on the mask is holding the ear buds in place. I can still hear him, though the sound is muffled, as he rises from the bed. I am deafened by my own breathing -- It's shallow and erratic, reflecting my excitement. Edward takes my left arm, stretches it gently to the left-hand corner and attaches the leather cuff around my wrist. His long fingers stroke the length of my arm once he's finished… oh… his touch elicits a delicious, tickly shiver. I hear him move slowly round to the other side, take my right arm and cuff it… again his long fingers linger along my arm. Oh my… I am fit to burst already… why is this so erotic?

He moves to the bottom of the bed and grabs both of my ankles.

"Lift your head again," he orders. I comply and he pulls me down the bed so that my arms are stretched out and almost straining at the cuffs. Jeez -- I cannot move my arms… A frisson of trepidation mixed with tantalizing exhilaration sweeps through my body… making me wetter… ooh… Parting my legs he cuffs first my right ankle then my left, so I am staked out, spread-eagled, totally vulnerable to him. And it's so unnerving that I can't see him. I listen hard… what's he doing? And I hear nothing… mere silence, except for my breathing and the pounding thud of my heart as blood pulses furiously against my eardrums…

And abruptly I hear the soft silent hiss and pop of the iPod as it springs into life. From inside my head a lone angelic voice sings, unaccompanied a long sweet note, and it's joined almost immediately by another voice, and then more voices -- jeez, a celestial choir -- singing acapella in my head, some ancient, ancient hymnal… *holy cow, what IS this?* I have never heard anything like it. And I feel something almost unbearably soft against my neck, running languidly down my throat, slowly across my chest, over my breasts,

caressing me… pulling at my nipples, it's so soft, skimming underneath… its so *unexpected… it's fur… a fur glove?* Edward trails his hand, unhurried and deliberate down to my belly, circling my navel, then carefully from hip to hip, and I'm trying to anticipate where he's going next…. but the music… it's in my head… transporting me…. the fur across the line of my pubic hair… between my legs, along my thighs, down one leg… up the other… it almost tickles… but not quite… more voices join… the heavenly choir all singing different parts their voices blending blissfully and sweetly together in a melodic harmony that is beyond anything I've ever heard. I catch one word -- *'deus'*-- and I realize they are singing in Latin. And still the fur is moving down my arms and round my waist… back up across my breasts… I can feel my nipples harden beneath the soft touch… and I am panting… wondering where his hand will go next… and suddenly, the fur is gone, and I can feel the fronds of the flogger flowing over my skin, following the same path as the fur, and it's so hard to concentrate with the music in my head -- it sounds like a hundred voices singing, weaving an ethereal tapestry of fine silken, gold and silver voices through my head, mixed with the feel of the soft suede against my skin… trailing over me…. *oh my*… it's gone. And then suddenly, sharply, it bites down on my belly…

"Aagghh!" I cry out.

It takes me by surprise… and it doesn't exactly hurt, but tingles all over… and he hits me again. Harder.

"Aaah!"

I want to move, to writhe… to escape, or to welcome, each blow… I don't know – it's so overwhelming… I can't pull my arms… my legs are stuck… I am held very firmly in place… and again he strikes… across my breasts -- I cry out… and it's a sweet agony-- bearable, just… pleasant – no, not immediately, but as my skin sings with each blow, in perfect counterpoint to the music in my head, I am dragged into a dark, dark part of my psyche that surrenders to this most erotic sensation… *yes -- I get this*. He hits me across my hips and then moves in swift blows over my pubic hair, on my thighs, and down my inner thighs… and back up my body… across my hips… he keeps going, as the music reaches a climax, and then suddenly -- the music stops… And so does he. Then the singing starts again… building and building, and he rains down blows on me… and I groan, and writhe… and then once again it ceases, and all is quiet… except my wild breathing… what's happening…? What's he going to do now? And I am beyond excited... I've entered a very dark carnal place...

The bed moves and shifts as I feel him clamber over me the song starts again…. jeez he's got it on repeat… this time it's his nose and lips that take the place of the fur… running down my neck and throat, kissing, sucking… trailing… down to my breasts… oh my… taunting each of my nipples in turn… his tongue swirling round one whilst his fingers relentlessly tease the other… I groan, loudly I think, though I can't hear… I am lost. Lost in

him… lost in the astral, seraphic voices… lost to all the sensations I cannot escape … I am completely at the mercy of his expert touch…

He moves down… to my belly – his tongue circling my navel -- following the path of the flogger and the fur… oh my… he's kissing and sucking and nibbling… moving south…and then his tongue is *there*... At the junction of my thighs I throw my head back and cry out as I almost detonate into orgasm… and he stops.

No! I can feel him kneeling between my legs. He leans towards the bedpost and the cuff on my ankle is suddenly gone. I pull my leg to the middle of the bed… against him. He leans over to the opposite post and frees my other leg… his hands travel quickly down both my legs, squeezing and kneading… bringing life back into them. Then, grasping my hips, he lifts me so that my back is no longer on the bed… I am arched, resting on my shoulders… *What?* He's kneeling up between my legs…and in one swift slamming move he's inside me… *oh fuck*… and I cry out again… I can feel the quiver of my orgasm beginning and he stills… The quiver dies… *oh no*... he's going to torture me further.

"Please..!" I wail.

He grips me harder… in warning? I don't know, his fingers digging into the flesh of my behind… as I lay panting…so I purposefully still. Very slowly he starts to move again… out and then in… agonizingly slowly... *Holy Fuck -- Please!* I'm screaming inside… And as the number of voices in the choral piece increases… so does his pace, infinitesimally, he's so controlled… so in time with the music... and I can no longer bear it…

"Please," I beg, and in one swift move he lowers me back on to the bed and he's lying on top of me, his hands on the bed beside my breasts as he supports his weight, and he thrusts into me, and as the music reaches its climax, I fall… free fall… into the most intense agonizing orgasm I have ever had… and Edward follows me… thrusting hard into me, three more times… finally stilling, then collapsing on top of me…

As my consciousness returns from wherever it's been Edward pulls himself out of me. The music has stopped and I can feel him stretch across my body as he undoes the cuff on my right wrist. I groan as my hand is freed. He quickly frees my other hand, gently pulls the mask from my eyes, and removes the ear buds. I blink in the dim soft light and stare up into his intense green gaze.

"Hi," he murmurs.

"Hi yourself," I breathe shyly back at him.

His lips quirk up into a smile and he leans down and kisses me softly.

"Well done you," he whispers. "Turn over."

Holy fuck -- what's he going to do now? His eyes soften.

"I'm just going to rub your shoulders."

"Oh… okay."

I roll stiffly on to my front… jeez I am tired… Edward sits astride me and starts to massage my shoulders. I groan loudly… he has such strong, knowing fingers. Leaning down he kisses my head gently.

"What was that music?"

"It's called Spem In Alium, or the Forty Part Motet, by Thomas Tallis."

"It was… overwhelming."

"I've always wanted to fuck to it."

"Not another first, Mr Cullen?"

"Indeed Miss Swan."

I groan again as his fingers work their magic on my shoulders.

"Well, it's the first time I've fucked to it too…" I murmur sleepily.

"Hmmm… you and I, we're giving each other many firsts." His voice is matter-of-fact.

"What did I say to you in my sleep, Ed -- err, Sir?"

His hands pause their ministrations for a moment.

"You said lots of things Isabella. You talked about cages and strawberries… and that you wanted more… and that you missed me."

Oh, thank heavens for that.

"Is that all?" And I can hear the relief evident in my voice.

Edward stops his sublime massage and shifts so that he's lying beside me. His head propped up on his elbow. He's frowning.

"What did you think you'd said?"

Oh crap.

"That I thought you were ugly, conceited and that you were hopeless in bed."

He crease on his brow deepens.

"Well, naturally I am all those things…and now you've got me really intrigued. What are you hiding from me, Miss Swan?"

I blink at him innocently.

"I'm not hiding anything."

"Isabella, you are a hopeless liar."

"I thought you were going to make me giggle after sex… this isn't doing it for me."

His lips quirk up. "I can't tell jokes."

"Mr Cullen! Something you can't do?" I grin at him.

And he grins back. "No… hopeless joke teller." And he looks so proud of himself that I start to giggle.

"I'm a hopeless joke teller too,"

"That is such a lovely sound," he murmurs and he leans forward and kisses me… "And you are hiding something Isabella. I may have to torture it out of you.

Chapter 51

I wake with a jolt – I think I've just fallen down some stairs in a dream – and I sit bolt upright, momentarily disorientated. It is dark and I'm in Edward's bed, alone. Something has woken me, some nagging thought. I glance over at the alarm clock on his bedside. It is 5:00 in the morning, but I feel rested. Why is that? Oh, it's the time difference – it would be 8:00 in Florida. *Holy crap, I need to take my pill*. I climb out of bed, grateful for whatever it is that has woken me. I can hear faint notes from the piano… Edward is playing. Oh my, this I must see. Naked, I grab my bathrobe from the chair, and wander quietly down the corridor, slipping on my robe, listening to the magical sound of the melodic lament that's coming from the great room.

It is dark, but Edward sits in a bubble of light as he plays, his hair glinting burnished copper. He looks naked too, though I know he's wearing his PJ bottoms. He's concentrating, lost in the melancholy of the music. He plays so well. I hesitate, watching from the shadows, not wanting to interrupt him. He looks… lost, sad… achingly lonely, and I want to hold him, or maybe it's just the music that's so full of poignant sorrow. He finishes the piece, pauses for a split second, then starts to play it again. I move cautiously towards him, drawn, as the moth to the flame. The idea makes me smile, and he glances up at me, and frowns slightly, as he returns to watch his hands.

Oh crap, is he pissed off that I am disturbing him?

"You should be asleep," he scolds mildly. I can tell he's pre-occupied with something.

"So should you," I retort, not quite as mildly.

He glances up at me, his lips twitching with a trace of a smile.

"Are you scolding me, Miss Swan?"

"Yes, Mr. Cullen, I am."

"Well, I can't sleep." He frowns again and I can see a trace of irritation or anger flash across his face. With me? Surely not. I ignore his facial expression and very bravely sit down beside him on the piano stool, placing my head on his bare shoulder to watch his deft, agile fingers caress the keys. He pauses fractionally, and then continues to the end of the piece.

"What was that?" I ask softly.

"Chopin. Opus 28, number 4. In E minor, if you're really interested," he murmurs softly.

"I'm always interested in what you do."

He turns and softly presses his lips against my hair.

"I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't. Play the other one."

"Other one?"

"The Bach piece that you played the first night I stayed."

"Oh, the Marcello…"

He starts to play, and I feel the movement of his hands in his shoulder, as I lean against him and close my eyes. The sad soulful notes swirl up slowly and mournfully around us, echoing off the walls. It is a hauntingly beautiful piece, sadder even than the Chopin, and I lose myself to the beauty of the lament. To a certain extent, it reflects how I feel, the deep poignant longing I have to know this extraordinary man better, to try and understand *his* sadness. All too soon the piece is at an end.

"Why do you only play such sad music?"

I sit upright and gaze up at him as he shrugs in answer to my question, his expression wary.

"So you were just six when you started to play?" I prompt.

He nods, his wary look intensifying. After a moment he volunteers, "I threw myself into learning the piano to please my new mother."

"To fit into the perfect family?"

"Yes, so to speak," he says evasively. "Why are you awake? Don't you need to recover from yesterday's… exertions?"

"It's 8:00 in the morning for me. And I need to take my pill."

He raises his eyebrows in surprise. "Well remembered," he murmurs, and I can tell he's impressed. His lips quirk up in a half smile. "Only you would start a course of time-specific birth control pills in a different time zone. Perhaps you should wait half an hour, and then another half hour tomorrow morning. So eventually you can take them at a reasonable time."

"Good plan," I murmur. "So what shall we do for half an hour?" I blink innocently at him.

"I can think of a few things," he grins, green eyes glowing.

I gaze back at him impassively as my insides clench and then melt under his knowing look.

"On the other hand, we could talk," I murmur.

He frowns. "I prefer what I have in mind." He scoops me onto his lap.

"You'd always rather have sex than talk." I laugh, steadying myself by holding on to his upper arms.

"True. Especially with you." He nuzzles my hair and starts a steady trail of kisses from below my ear to my throat. "Maybe on my piano," he whispers.

Oh my. My whole body tightens at the thought. *Piano… wow.*

"I want to get something straight," I breathe, as my pulse starts to accelerate and my inner goddess closes her eyes reveling in the feel of his lips on me.

He pauses momentarily, before continuing his sensual assault. "Always so eager for information, Miss Swan. What needs straightening out?" he breathes against my skin at the base of my neck, continuing his soft gentle kisses.

"Us," I whisper as I close my eyes.

"Hmmm. What about us?" He pauses his trail of kisses along my shoulder.

"The contract."

He lifts his head to gaze down at me, a hint of amusement in his eyes, and sighs. He strokes his fingertips down my cheek.

"Well I think the contract is moot, don't you?" His voice is low and husky, his eyes soft.

"Moot?"

"Moot." He smiles at me.

I gape at him quizzically. "But you were so keen."

"Well, that was before. Anyway the Rules aren't moot, they still stand." His expression hardens slightly.

"Before? Before what?"

"Before…" he pauses and the wary expression is back, "More." He shrugs.

"Oh."

"Besides, we've been in the playroom twice now, and you haven't run screaming for the hills."

"Do you expect me to?"

"Nothing you do is expected, Isabella," he says dryly.

"So, let me be clear… you just want me to follow the Rules element of the contract, all the time, but not the rest of the contract?"

"Except in the playroom. I want you to follow the spirit of the contract in the playroom, and yes, I want you to follow the rules – all the time. Then I know you'll be safe and I'll be able to have you anytime I wish."

"And if I break one of the rules?"

"Then I'll punish you."

"But won't you need my permission?"

"Yes, I will."

"And if I say no?"

He gazes at me for a moment, with a confused expression. "If you say no, you'll say no. I'll have to find a way to persuade you."

I pull away from him and stand. I need some distance. He frowns as I stare down at him. He looks puzzled, wary again.

"So the punishment aspect remains."

"Yes, but only if you break the rules."

"I'll need to re-read them," I say, trying to recall the detail.

"I'll fetch them for you."

Whoa… This has gotten serious so quickly. He rises from the piano and walks lithely to his study. My scalp prickles. Jeez, I need some tea. The future of our so-called relationship, being discussed at 5:45 in the morning when he's pre-occupied with something else. Is this wise? I head into the kitchen area, still shrouded in darkness. Where are the light switches? I find them, flick them on and pour water into the kettle. And I need to take my pill. I rummage in the purse I left on the breakfast bar, locate them, and fetch a glass of water. By the time I finish Edward is back, sitting on one of the bar stools, watching me intently.

"Here you go." He pushes a typed piece of paper towards me and I can see that he's crossed some things out.

RULES

1. *Obedience: The Submissive will obey any instructions given by The Dominant immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the*

Dominant excepting those activities which are outlined in hard limits (Appendix A). She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

2. *Sleep: The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of eight seven hours sleep a night when she is not with The Dominant.*
3. *Food: The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and wellbeing from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix B). The Submissive will not snack between meals, with the exception of fruit.*
4. *Clothes: Whilst with The Dominant, The Submissive will wear clothing only approved by The Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for The Submissive, which The Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany The Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis.*
5. *Exercise: The Dominant shall provide The Submissive with a personal trainer four three times a week in hour-long sessions at times to be mutually agreed between the personal trainer and The Submissive. The personal trainer will report to The Dominant on The Submissive's progress.*
6. *Personal Hygiene/Beauty: The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of The Dominant's choosing at times to be decided by The Dominant, and undergo whatever treatments The Dominant sees fit.*
7. *Personal Safety: The Submissive will not drink to excess, smoke, take recreational drugs or put herself in any unnecessary danger.*
8. *Personal Qualities: The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relations with anyone other than The Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself in a respectful and modest manner at all times. She must recognize that her behavior is a direct reflection on The Dominant and she shall be held accountable for any misdeeds, wrongdoings and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.*

"So the obedience thing still stands?"

"Oh yes." He grins.

I shake my head amused and before I realise it I roll my eyes at him.

"Did you just roll your eyes at me, Isabella?" He breathes.

Oh fuck.

"Possibly. Depends what your reaction is."

"Same as always," he says, shaking his head slightly, his eyes alight with excitement.

I swallow instinctively and a frisson of exhilaration runs through me.

"So…" *Holy shit. What am I going to do?*

"Yes?" He licks his lower lip.

"You want to spank me now."

"Oh yes, and I will."

"Oh really, Mr. Cullen?" I challenge, grinning back at him. Two can play this game.

"Are you going to stop me?"

"Well, you're going to have to catch me first."

His eyes widen a fraction and he grins, slowly getting to his feet. "Oh really, Miss Swan?"

The breakfast bar is between us. I have never been so grateful for its existence than in this moment.

"And you're biting your lip," he breathes, moving slowly to his left, as I move to mine.

"You wouldn't," I tease. "After all, you roll your eyes." I try reasoning with him. He continues to move towards his left, as do I.

"Yes, but you've just raised the bar on the excitement stakes with this game." His eyes blaze at me and I can feel the wild anticipation emanating from him.

"I'm quite fast you know." I try for nonchalance.

"So am I."

He's stalking me, in his own kitchen.

"Are you going to come quietly?" he asks.

"Do I ever?"

"Miss Swan, what do you mean?" he smirks. "It'll be worse for you if I have to come and get you."

"That's only if you catch me, Edward. And right now I have no intention of letting you catch me."

“Isabella, you may fall and hurt yourself. Which will put you in direct contravention of rule number seven.”

“I have been in danger since I met you, Mr. Cullen, rules or no rules.”

“Yes you have.” He pauses, and his brow furrows slightly, and suddenly he lunges for me, making me squeal and run for the dining room table. I manage to escape, putting the table between us. My heart is pounding and adrenaline has spiked through my body. Boy, this is so thrilling. I feel like I'm a child again, though maybe that's not right. I watch him carefully as he paces deliberately towards me. I inch away.

“You certainly know how to distract a man, Isabella.”

“We aim to please, Mr. Cullen. Distract you from what?”

“Life, the universe…” He waves one of his hands vaguely.

“You did seem very pre-occupied as you were playing.”

He stops and folds his arms, his expression amused.

“We can do this all day baby, but I will get you, and it will just be worse for you when I do.”

“No, you won’t.” I must not be over-confident. I repeat this as a mantra. My subconscious has found her Nikes and she’s on the starting blocks.

“Anyone would think you didn’t want me to catch you.”

“I don’t. That’s the point. I feel about punishment the way you feel about me touching you.”

His entire demeanor changes in a nanosecond. Gone is playful Edward, and he stands staring at me as if I’d slapped him, ashen.

“That’s how you feel?” he whispers.

Those four words, and the way he utters them, speaks volumes. They tell me so much more about him, and how he feels. I frown. No, I don’t feel *that* bad. No way… Do I?

“No, it doesn’t affect me quite as much as that, but it gives you an idea,” I murmur, staring anxiously at him.

“Oh,” he says.

Crap. He looks completely and utterly lost, like I've pulled the rug from under his feet.

Taking a deep breath, I move around the table until I am standing in front of him, gazing into his apprehensive eyes.

"You hate it that much?" he breathes, his eyes filled with horror.

"Well, no…" I reassure him. *Jeez, that's what he feels about people touching him?* "No. I feel ambivalent about it. I don't like it, but I don't hate it."

"But last night, in the playroom, you…" he trails off.

"I do it for you Edward, because you need it. I don't. You didn't hurt me last night. That was in a different context and I can rationalize that internally, and I trust you. But when you want to punish me, I worry that you'll hurt me."

His green eyes blaze, and time moves, expands and slips away before he answers softly. "I want to hurt you. But not beyond anything that you couldn't take."

"Why?"

He runs his hand through his hair and he shrugs.

"I just need it." He pauses, gazing at me with anguished green eyes, and he closes them and shakes his head. "I can't tell you," he whispers.

"Can't or won't?"

"Won't."

"So you know why."

"Yes."

"But you won't tell me."

"If I do, you will run screaming from this room, and you'll never want to return." He stares at me warily. "I can't risk that, Isabella."

"You want me to stay."

"More than you know. I couldn't bear to lose you."

Oh my.

He gazes down at me and suddenly he pulls me into his arms and he's kissing me, kissing me passionately. It takes me completely by surprise and I can feel panic and desperate need in his kiss.

"Don't leave me. You said you wouldn't leave me and you begged me not to leave you … in your sleep," he murmurs against my lips.

Oh, my nocturnal confessions.

"I don't want to go." My heart clenches, turning itself inside out. This is a man in need. His fear is naked and obvious, but he's lost, somewhere in his darkness. His green eyes wide and tortured. I can soothe him. Join him briefly in the darkness and bring him into the light.

"Show me," I whisper.

"Show you?"

"Show me how much it can hurt."

"What?"

"Punish me. I want to know how bad it can get."

Edward steps back from me, completely confused. "You would try?"

"Yes. I said I would…" But I have an ulterior motive. If I do this for him, maybe he will let me touch him.

He blinks at me. "Bella… you're so confusing."

"I'm confused, too. I'm trying to work this out. And you and I will know, once and for all, if I can do this. If I can handle this, then maybe you …" My words trail off and his eyes widen again. He knows I am referring to the touch thing. He looks torn, but then a steely resolve settles on his features and he narrows his eyes, gazing at me speculatively as if weighing up alternatives. Abruptly, he clasps my arm in a firm grip and turns, leading me out of the great room, up the stairs to the playroom. Pleasure and pain, reward and punishment – his words from so long ago echo through my mind.

"I'll show you how bad it can be, and you can make your own mind up." He pauses by the door. "Are you ready for this?"

I nod, my mind made up, and I feel vaguely lightheaded, faint as all the blood leaves my face.

He opens the door, and still grasping my arm, grabs what looks like a belt from the rack beside the door, then leads me over to the red leather bench in the far corner of the room.

"Bend over the bench," he murmurs softly.

Okay, I can do this. He's left my bathrobe on. In a quiet part of my brain, I'm vaguely surprised that he hasn't made me take it off. *Holy fuck, this is going to hurt, I know.* My subconscious has passed out and my inner goddess is endeavoring to look brave.

"We're here because you said yes, Isabella. And you ran from me. I am going to hit you six times and you will count with me."

Why the hell doesn't he just get on with it? He always makes such a meal of punishing me. I roll my eyes, knowing full well he can't see me.

He lifts the hem of my bathrobe, and for some reason this feels more intimate than being naked. He gently caresses my behind, running his warm hand all over both cheeks and down to the tops of my thighs.

"I am doing this so that you remember not to run from me, and as exciting as it is, I never want you to run from me," he whispers.

And the irony is not lost on me. I was running to avoid this. If he'd opened his arms, I'd run to him, not away from him.

"And you rolled your eyes at me. You know how I feel about that." Suddenly it's gone, that nervous edgy fear in his voice. He's back from wherever he's been. I can feel it in his tone, in the way he places his fingers on my back, holding me. I can feel the atmosphere in the room change.

I close my eyes, bracing myself for the blow, and it comes hard, snapping across my backside, and the bite of the belt is everything I feared. I cry out, involuntarily, and take a huge gulp of air.

"Count, Isabella!" he commands.

"One!" I shout at him and it sounds like an expletive.

He hits me again and the pain pulses and echoes along the line of the belt. *Holy shit, that smarts.*

"Two!" I scream. It feels so good to scream.

I can hear his breathing… ragged, harsh. Whereas mine is almost non-existent as I desperately scrabble around my psyche looking for some internal strength. The belt cuts into my flesh again.

"Three…!" Tears spring unwelcome into my eyes. Jeez, this is harder than I thought – so much harder than the spanking. He's not holding anything back.

"Four!" I yell as the belt bites me again, and now the tears are streaming down my face. I don't want to cry. It angers me that I am crying.

He hits me again.

"Five…" My voice is more a choked, strangled sob and in this moment I think I hate him. One more, I can do one more. My backside feels as if it's on fire.

"Six," I whisper, as the blistering pain cuts across me again, and I hear him drop the belt behind me, and he's pulling me into his arms, all breathless and compassionate… and I want none of him.

"Let go. No..." And I find myself struggling out his grasp, pushing him away. Fighting him. "Don't touch me!" I hiss. I straighten and stare at him and he's watching me as if I might bolt, green eyes wide, bemused. I dash the tears angrily out of my eyes with the backs of my hands, glaring at him. "This is what you really like? Me, like this?" I use the sleeve of the bathrobe to wipe my nose.

He gazes at me impassively.

"Well, you are one fucked-up son of a bitch."

"Bella," he pleads, shocked.

"Don't you dare 'Bella' me! You need to sort your shit out, Cullen!" And with that, I turn stiffly and I walk out of the playroom, closing the door quietly behind me.

Chapter 52

I clasp the door handle behind me and briefly lean back against the door. Where to go? Do I run? Do I stay? I am so mad in this moment. Angry, scalding tears spill down my cheeks and I brush them furiously aside. I just want to curl up. Curl up and recuperate in some way, heal my shattered faith. How could I have been so stupid? Of course it hurts. Tentatively, I rub my backside… aahh! It's sore. Where to go? Not his room. My room, or the room that will be mine. No, *is* mine. *Was* mine. This is why he wanted me to keep it. He knew I would need space away from him.

I launch myself stiffly in that direction, conscious that Edward may follow me.

It is still dark in the bedroom, dawn only a whisper in the skyline. I climb awkwardly into bed, careful not to sit on my aching and tender backside. I keep the bathrobe on, wrapping it around me, and curl up, and then really let go, sobbing hard into my pillow.

What was I thinking? Why did I let him do that to me? I wanted the dark, to explore how bad it could be, but it's too dark for me. I cannot do this. Yet this is what he does, this is how he gets his kicks. What a monumental wake-up call. And to be fair to him, he warned me, and warned me, time and again. He's not normal. He has needs which I cannot fulfill. I realize that now. I don't want him to hit me like that again… ever. I think of the couple of times he has hit me, and how easy he was on me by comparison. Is that enough for him? I sob harder into the pillow. I am going to lose him. He won't want to be with me if I can't give him this. Why, why, why have I fallen in love with Fifty Shades… why? Why can't I love Jake, or Mike Newton, or someone… like me?

Oh, his look as I left… I was so cruel, so shocked by the savagery. Will he forgive me? Will I forgive him? My thoughts are all haywire and jumbled, echoing and bouncing off the inside of my brain. My subconscious is shaking her head sadly and my inner goddess is nowhere to be seen. Oh, this is a dark morning of the soul for me. I feel so alone. I want my Mom. I remember her parting words at the airport:

Follow your heart, darling and please, please – try not to over-think things. Relax and enjoy. You are so young, sweetheart, you have so much to experience, just let it happen. You deserve the best of everything.

I did follow my heart, and I have a sore ass and an anguished, broken spirit to show for it. I have to go. That's it. I have to leave. He's no good for me and I am no good for him. How can we possibly make this work? And the thought of not seeing him again practically chokes me. My Fifty Shades….

I hear the door click open. Oh no, he's here. He puts something down on the bedside table and the bed shifts under his weight as he climbs in behind me.

"Hush," he breathes and I want to pull away from him, move to the other side of the bed, but I'm paralyzed. I cannot move and I lie stiffly, not yielding at all.

"Don't fight me Bella, please," he whispers and gently pulls me into his arms, burying his nose in my hair, kissing my neck. "Don't hate me," he breathes softly against my skin, his voice achingly sad. My heart clenches anew and releases a fresh wave of silent sobbing. He continues to kiss me softly, tenderly, but I remain aloof and wary.

We lie together like this, neither saying anything for ages. He just holds me, and very gradually, I relax and stop crying. Dawn comes and goes, and the soft light gets brighter as morning moves on… and still, we lie quietly.

“I brought you some advil and some arnica cream,” he says after a long while.

I turn very slowly in his arms so I can face him. I am resting my head on his arm. His eyes are bright green and guarded.

I gaze at his beautiful face. He’s giving nothing away, but he keeps his eyes on mine, hardly blinking. Oh, he is so breathtakingly good-looking. In such a short time he’s become so, so dear to me. I reach up and caress his cheek, running the tips of my fingers through his stubble, and he closes his eyes and exhales slightly.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper.

He opens his eyes and looks at me puzzled. “What for?”

“What I said.”

“You didn’t tell me anything I didn’t know.” And his eyes soften… with relief. "I am sorry I hurt you."

I shrug. "I asked for it." And now I know. I swallow… Here goes. I need to say my piece.

“I don’t think I can be everything you want me to be,” I whisper.

His eyes widen slightly, and he blinks, his fearful expression returning.

“You are everything I want you to be.”

What?

“I don’t understand. I’m not obedient, and you can be as sure as hell I’m not going to let you do *that* to me again. And that’s what you need, you said so.”

He closes his eyes again and I can see a myriad of emotions cross his face. When he reopens them, his expression is bleak. *Oh no…*

“You’re right. I should let you go. I am no good for you.”

My scalp prickles as every single hair follicle on my body stands to attention and the world falls away from me, leaving a wide yawning abyss for me to fall into *Oh no.*

“I don’t want to go,” I whisper. Fuck, this is it… pay or play. Tears swim in my eyes once more.

"I don't want you to go either," he whispers, his voice raw. He reaches up and gently strokes my cheek and wipes away a falling tear with his thumb. "I've come alive since I met you." His thumb traces the contours of my lower lip.

"Me too," I whisper. "I've fallen in love with you, Edward."

His eyes widen again, but this time, with pure, undiluted fear.

"No," he breathes, as if I've knocked the wind out of him.

Oh no.

"You can't love me, Bella, no. That's wrong." He's horrified.

"Wrong? Why's it wrong?"

"Well, look at you. I can't make you happy." And I can hear the anguish in his voice.

"But you do make me happy." I frown.

"Not at the moment, not doing what I want to do."

Holy fuck. This really is it. This is what it boils down to… incompatibility. And all those poor subs come to mind.

"We'll never get past that, will we?" I whisper.

He shakes his head bleakly.

I close my eyes. I cannot bear to look at him.

"Well, I'd better go, then," I murmur, wincing as I sit up.

"No, don't go." He sounds panicked.

"There's no point in me staying."

Suddenly I feel tired. Really dog-tired, and I want to go, now. I climb out of bed and Edward follows.

"I'm going to get dressed. I'd like some privacy," I say, and I can hear how flat and empty my voice sounds as I leave him standing in the bedroom. Heading downstairs, I glance at the great room, thinking how only hours before I had rested my head on his shoulder as he played the piano. So much has happened… I have had my eyes opened and glimpsed the

extent of his depravity, and I now know he's not capable of love – of giving or receiving love. My worst fears have been realized. And strangely, it's very liberating. The pain is such that I refuse to acknowledge it. I feel ... numb. I have somehow escaped from my body and am now a casual observer to the unfolding tragedy. I shower quickly and methodically, thinking only of each second in front of me. Now squeeze bodywash bottle. Put bodywash bottle back in rack. Rub cloth on face, on shoulders, on and on. Simple, mechanical actions, requiring simple mechanical thoughts. I finish my shower – and as I haven't washed my hair I can dry myself quickly – and dress in the bathroom, taking my jeans and t-shirt out of my small suitcase. My jeans chafe against my backside, but quite frankly it's a pain I welcome, as it distracts my mind from what's happening to my splintering, shattered heart.

I stoop to shut my suitcase and the bag holding Edward's gift catches my eye. A modeling kit for a Blahnik L23 glider, something for him to build. Tears threaten. *Oh no…* Happier times, when there was hope of more. I take it out of the case, knowing that I need to give it to him. Quickly, I rip a small piece of paper from my notebook, hastily scribble a note for him, and leave it on top of the box.

This reminded me of a happy time.
Thank you.

Bella

I gaze at myself in the mirror. I look pale and haunted. I scoop my hair into a ponytail and ignore how swollen my eyelids are from the crying. My subconscious nods with approval. Even she knows not to be snarky right now. I cannot believe that my world is crumbling around me into a sterile pile of ashes. No, no don't think about it. Not now, not yet. Taking a deep breath, I pick up my case, and after placing the glider kit and my note on his pillow, I head for the great room.

Edward is on the phone. He's dressed, in black jeans and t-shirt. His feet are bare.

"He said what!" he shouts, making me jump. "Well, he could have told us the fucking truth. What's his number, I need to call him… Jenks, this is a real fuck-up." He glances up and doesn't take his dark and brooding eyes off me. "Find her," he snaps, and presses the off switch. I walk over to the couch and collect my backpack, doing my best to ignore him. Out of it, I take the Mac and as I walk back towards the kitchen, I place it on the breakfast bar, along with the BlackBerry and the car key.

When I turn to face him he's staring at me, stupefied with horror.

"I need the money that Taylor got for my van." My voice is clear and calm, devoid of emotion… *extraordinary.*

"Bella, I don't want those things. They're yours," he says in disbelief. "Please, take them."

“No, Edward. I only accepted them under sufferance – and I don’t want them any more.”

“Bella, be reasonable,” he scolds me… even now.

“I don’t want anything that will remind me of you. I need a clean break. And I need the money that Taylor got for my truck.” My voice is quite monotone.

He gasps. “Are you really trying to wound me?”

“No.” I frown staring at him. Of course not… I love you. “I am not. I am trying to protect myself,” I whisper. Because you don’t want me… the way I want you.

“Please Bella, take that stuff.”

“Edward, I don’t want to fight, I just need that money.”

He narrows his eyes at me, but I am no longer intimidated by him. Well, only a little. I gaze impassively back, not blinking or backing down.

“Will you take a check?” he says acidly.

“Yes. I think you’re good for it.”

He doesn’t smile, he just turns on his heel and stalks into his study. I take a last lingering look around his apartment, at the art on the walls. All abstracts… serene, cool… cold, even. Fitting, I think absently. My eyes stray to the piano. Jeez, if I’d kept my mouth shut, we’d have made love on the piano… No, fucked. We would have fucked on the piano. Well, I would have made love. The thought lies heavy and sad in my mind. He has never made love to me... has he? It's always been fucking to him.

Edward comes back into the room and hands me an envelope.

“Taylor got a good price. It’s a classic car. You can ask him. He’ll take you home.” He nods in the direction over my shoulder, and I turn, and Taylor is standing in the doorway, wearing his suit, as impeccable as ever.

“That’s fine. I can get myself home, thank you.”

I turn to stare at Edward and I can see the barely-contained fury in his eyes.

“Are you going to defy me at every turn?”

“Why change a habit of a lifetime?” I give him a small apologetic shrug.

He closes his eyes in frustration and runs his hand through his hair.

“Please, Bella, let Taylor take you home.”

“I’ll get the car, Miss Swan,” Taylor announces authoritatively. Edward nods at him, and when I glance around, Taylor has gone.

I turn back to face Edward. We are four feet apart. He steps forward, and instinctively I step back. He stops and the anguish in his expression is palpable, his green eyes burning.

“I don’t want you to go,” he murmurs, his voice full of longing.

“I can’t stay. I know what I want, and you can’t give it to me, and I can’t give you what you need.”

He takes another step forward and I hold up my hands.

“Don’t, please.” I recoil from him. There’s no way I can tolerate his touch now… That will finish me off. “I can’t do this.”

Grabbing my suitcase and my backpack, I head for the foyer. He follows me, keeping a careful distance. He presses the elevator button and the doors open. I climb in.

“Goodbye, Edward,” I murmur.

“Bella… goodbye,” he says softly and he looks utterly, utterly broken, a man in agonizing pain, reflecting how I feel inside. I tear my gaze away from him, before I change my mind and try to comfort him.

The elevator doors close, and it whisks me down to the bowels of the basement, and to my own personal hell.

Chapter 53

Taylor holds the door open for me and I climb into the back of the car. I avoid eye contact. I feel embarrassed, ashamed – a complete failure. I had hoped to drag my Fifty Shades into the light, but it's proved a task beyond my meagre abilities. I am desperately trying to keep my emotions banked and at bay. As we head out onto 4th Avenue, I stare blankly out of the window, and the enormity of what I've done slowly washes over me. *Shit, I've left him*. The only man I've ever loved. The only man I've ever slept with… and the levees burst. Tears course unbidden and unwelcome down my cheeks and I wipe them away hurriedly with my fingers, scrambling in my bag for my sunglasses. As we pause at some traffic lights Taylor holds out a linen handkerchief for me. He says nothing, and doesn't look in my direction, and I take it with gratitude.

"Thank you," I mutter, and this small discreet act of kindness is my undoing. I sit back in the luxurious leather seats and weep.

The apartment is achingly empty and unfamiliar. I have not lived here long enough for it to feel like home. I head straight to my room and there, hanging limply at the end of my bed, is a very sad deflated helicopter balloon. Echo Charlie, looking and feeling exactly like me. I grab it angrily off my bedrail, snapping the tie, and hug it to me. Oh, what have I done? I fall onto my bed, shoes and all, and howl. The pain is indescribable… physical, mental, metaphysical… it is everywhere, seeping into the marrow of my bones. Grief, this is grief, and I've brought it on myself. Deep down, a nasty unbidden thought comes from my inner goddess, her lip curled in a snarl. The physical pain from the bite of a belt is nothing, nothing compared to this devastation. I curl up, desperately clutching the flat foil balloon and Taylor's handkerchief, and surrender myself to my grief.

I have survived Day Two Post Edward, and my first day at work. It has been a welcome distraction. The time has flown by in a haze of new faces, work to do and Mr. James Smith. He smiles down at me, his dark blue eyes twinkling, as he leans against my desk.

"Excellent work, Bella. I think we're going to make a great team." He beams at me, knowingly.

Somehow, I manage to curl my lips upwards in a semblance of a smile.

"Well, I'll be off, if that's okay with you," I murmur.

"Of course, it's 5:30. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Goodnight, James."

"Goodnight, Bella."

Collecting my bag, I shrug on my jacket and head for the door. Out in the early evening air of Seattle, I take a deep breath. It doesn't begin to fill the void in my chest, a void that's been present since Saturday morning. I head for the bus stop. Car-less in America… it just isn't right. I can afford a new car. I suspect *he* has been over-generous in his payment. The thought leaves a bitter after taste in my mouth but I dismiss it and try to keep my mind as blank as possible. I don't want to start crying again – not out on the streets.

The apartment is empty. I miss Rose. I turn on the flat screen so there's some noise to fill the vacuum, some semblance of company, but I don't listen or watch. I sit and stare blankly. I am so numb. When the entry phone buzzes, my heart skips a beat. Who could that be? I press the buzzer.

"Delivery for Ms. Swan," a bored, disembodied voice answers, and disappointment crashes down around me. Listlessly, I make my way downstairs to find a young man with a large cardboard box leaning against the front door, chewing gum. I sign for the package and take it upstairs. It's huge and surprisingly light. Inside are two-dozen long-stemmed white roses, and a card.

Congratulations on your first day at work.

I hope it went well.

And thank you for the glider, that was very thoughtful.

It has pride of place on my desk.

Edward

I stare at the typed card. No doubt his assistant sent this. Edward probably had very little to do with it. It's too painful to think about. I glance at the roses – they are beautiful. Dutifully, I make my way into the kitchen to hunt down a vase.

And so a pattern develops. Wake, work, cry, sleep… sort of. I can't even escape him in my dreams. Green burning eyes, his lost look, his hair, burnished and bright, and the music… so much music. I cannot bear to hear any music. I am careful to avoid it at all costs. Even the jingles in the commercials make me shudder.

I have spoken to no one. I haven't even called my mother, or Charlie. I just don't have the capacity for idle talk and chit-chat. No, I want none of it. I have become my own Island State. A ravaged, war-torn land where nothing grows and the horizons are bleak. Yes, that's me. I can interact impersonally at work, but that's it. If I talk to Mom I know I will break even further, and I have nothing left to break.

I am finding if difficult to eat. By Wednesday lunchtime, I manage a container of yogurt and it's the first thing I've eaten since Friday. I am surviving on lattes and Diet Coke. The caffeine keeps me going, but it's making me anxious. James has started to hover over me, irritatingly, asking personal questions. What does he want? I am polite, but I need to keep him at arm's length.

I sit and begin trawling through a pile of correspondence addressed to him, and I'm pleased with the distraction of menial work. My email pings, and I quickly check to see who it's from. *Holy fuck.* An email from Edward. Oh no, not here… not at work.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:05
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Isabella

Forgive this intrusion at work. I hope that it's going well. Did you get my flowers?
I note that tomorrow is the gallery opening for your friend's show, and I'm sure you've not had time to purchase a car.
I would be more than happy to take you – should you wish.
Let me know.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Tears swim in my eyes. I hastily leave my desk and make my way to the ladies' room, escaping into one of the cubicles. Jake's show, crap, I'd forgotten about it, and I promised him I would go. Edward is right, how am I going to get there? I clutch my forehead. Why hasn't Jake phoned? Come to think of it, why hasn't anyone phoned? I've been so… absent. I hadn't noticed that my cell phone has been silent. Oh, I am such an idiot! I still have my it on divert, to the BlackBerry. Gah, Edward's been getting my calls, unless of course he's just thrown the BlackBerry away. How did he get my email address? Of course, he knows my shoe size, an email address is hardly going to present him with many problems.

Can I see him again? Could I bear it? Do I want to see him? I close my eyes and tilt my head back as the pain lances through me. Of course I do. Perhaps… perhaps I can tell him I've changed my mind. No, no, no. I can't be with someone who takes pleasure in inflicting pain on me, someone who can't love me. Images flash through my mind: the gliding, holding hands, his dark, brooding, sexy stare, kissing me, the bathtub, his gentleness, his humor… *I miss him.* It's been four days. four days of hell. I wrap my arms around myself, hugging myself tightly. I really miss him, of course I do, I love him… simple. How long will this feeling last? It's purgatory.

I must pull myself together. *Isabella Swan, you are at work!*

I want to go to Jake's show, and deep down, I want to see Edward. I take a deep breath and head back to my desk.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:25
To: Edward Cullen

Hi Edward

Thank you for the flowers, they are lovely.
Yes, I would appreciate a lift.

Thank you.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

Checking my phone, I find that it is still switched to divert. James is in a meeting, so I quickly call Jake.

"Hi Jake, it's Bella."

"Hello, stranger." His tone is so warm and welcoming it's almost enough to push me over the edge again.

"I can't talk long. What time should I be there tomorrow for your show?"

"You're still coming?" He sounds so excited.

"Yes, of course." I smile – my first genuine smile in four or so days – as I picture his broad grin.

"7:30."

"See you then. Goodbye, Jake."

"Bye, Bells."

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tomorrow

Date: 10 June 2009: 14:27
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Isabella

What time shall I collect you?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:32
To: Edward Cullen

Jake's show starts at 7:30.
What time would you suggest?

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:34
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Isabella

Portland is some distance away. I shall collect you at 5:45.
I look forward to seeing you.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:38
To: Edward Cullen

See you then.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

Oh my. I'm going to see Edward, and for the first time in four days, I feel my spirits lift a fraction, and I allow myself to wonder how he's been. Has he missed me? Probably not like I've missed him. Has he found a sub… from wherever they come from? The thought is so painful that I dismiss it immediately. I look at the pile of correspondence I need to sort for James, and crack on with it.

That night in bed I toss and turn, trying to sleep. It is the first time in a while I have not cried myself to sleep. In my mind's eye, I can visualize Edward's face the last time I saw him, as I left his apartment. His tortured expression haunts me. I remember he didn't want me to go, which was so odd. Why would I stay, when things had reached such an impasse? We were each skirting around our own issues, my fear of punishment, his fear of… what? Love? I turn on my side and hug my pillow, filled with an overwhelming sadness. He doesn't think he deserves to be loved. How can he feel that way? My thoughts plague me into the early hours until eventually I fall into a fitful, exhausted sleep.

The day drags and drags, and James is unusually attentive. I suspect it's Rose's plum dress and the black high-heeled boots I've stolen from her closet. I really must go clothes shopping with my first paycheck. The dress is looser on me than it was. I pretend not to notice. Finally, it's 5:30, and I collect my jacket and bag. I am so nervous.

"Do you have a date tonight?" James asks, as he strolls past my desk on his way out.

"Yes… No. Not really."

He cocks an eyebrow at me, his interest clearly piqued. "Boyfriend?"

I flush.

"No, a friend. An ex-boyfriend."

"Well, maybe tomorrow you'd like to come for a drink after work. You've had a stellar week, Bella. We should celebrate." He smiles at me and some unknown emotion flits across his face. Putting his hands in his pockets he saunters through the double doors. I frown after him. Drinks with the boss, is this a good idea? I shake my head. I have an evening with Edward to get through. How am I going to do this? I scurry into the ladies to make any last minute adjustments.

In the large mirror on the wall of the ladies' powder room, I take a long hard look at myself. I am my usual pale self, dark circles round my too-large eyes. I look gaunt… haunted. Jeez, I wish I knew how to use make-up. I apply some mascara and eyeliner and pinch my cheeks, hoping to bring some color their way. Tidying my hair so that it hangs artfully down my back, I take a deep breath. This will have to do.

I make my way through the foyer, with a smile and a wave to Claire on reception. I think she and I could become friends. James is talking to Victoria as I head for the doors. He hurries over, smiling broadly, to open them for me.

"After you, Bella," he murmurs.

"Thank you." I smile, embarrassed.

And right outside, Taylor is standing waiting for me. He opens the rear door of the car. I glance hesitantly at James, who has followed me out. He's looking towards the Mercedes in dismay. I turn and climb into the back, and there he sits – Edward Cullen, in a grey flannel suit, no tie, white shirt, open at the collar, green eyes glowing. My mouth dries. He looks glorious, except he's scowling at me. *Oh no.*

"When did you last eat?" he snaps as Taylor closes the door behind me.

Oh crap.

"Hello Edward. Yes, it's nice to see you, too."

"I don't want your smart mouth now. Answer me." His eyes blaze at me.

Holy shit.

"Err… I had a yogurt at lunchtime. Oh, and a banana."

"When did you last have a meal?" he asks acidly.

Taylor slips into the driver's seat and pulls out into the traffic.

I glance up and James is waving to me, though how he can see me through the dark glass, I don't know. I wave back.

"Who's that?"

"My boss."

I peek up at Edward, and his mouth is pressed into a hard line.

"Well? Your last meal?"

"Edward, that really is none of your concern," I whisper, feeling extraordinarily brave.

"Whatever you do concerns me. Tell me."

No it doesn't. Oh, I groan in frustration and roll my eyes heavenwards, and he narrows his eyes. And for the first time in a long time, I want to laugh. I try hard to stifle the giggle that threatens to bubble through. Edward's face softens as I struggle to keep a straight face, and I see a trace of a smile kiss his beautifully sculptured lips.

"Well?" he asks, more softly.

"Pasta alla vongole… last Friday," I murmur.

He closes his eyes and I can see the fury, possibly regret, that crosses his face.

"I see," he says, his voice expressionless. "You look like you've lost at least five pounds, possibly more, since then. Please eat, Isabella." And it's a plea.

I stare down at the knotted fingers in my lap. Why does he always make me feel like an errant child?

He shifts beside me, turning towards me.

"How are you?" he asks, his voice still soft.

Well, *I'm shit really.* I swallow.

"If I told you I was fine, I'd be lying."

I hear his sharp intake of breath.

"Me too," he murmurs, and runs his hand through his hair. "I miss you," he adds.

I almost whimper, and he reaches over and clasps my hand… *oh no.*

"Edward… I…"

"Bella, please… We need to talk."

Oh no. I am going to cry… no.

"Edward… I … please. I have cried so much."

"Oh… baby, no." He pulls my hand and before I know it, I'm on his lap and has his arms around me and his nose is in my hair. "I've missed you so much, Isabella," he breathes.

I want to struggle, to maintain some kind of distance, but his arms are around me. He's pressing me to his chest. I melt… Oh, *this is where I want to be*. I rest my head against him and he kisses the top of my head repeatedly. *This is home.* And very briefly I allow myself the illusion that all will be well, and it nourishes my soul.

All too soon Taylor pulls to a stop and we're still in the city.

"Come," Edward shifts me off of his lap. "We're here."

What? I look at Edward bemused.

"Helipad – on the top of this building."

Oh, of course, Echo Charlie. Taylor opens the door and I slide out. He gives me a small warm smile, one that makes me feel safe. His avuncular look, I smile back.

"I should give you back your handkerchief."

"Keep it, Miss Swan, with my best wishes."

I flush as Edward comes around the car and takes my hand. He looks quizzically at Taylor who stares impassively back at him, revealing nothing.

"Nine?" Edward says to him.

"Yes, Sir."

Edward nods with approval as he turns and leads me through the double doors into the grandiose foyer. I revel in the feel of his large hand around mine. His long skilled fingers curled around mine. I can feel that familiar pull... I am drawn, Icarus to his sun. I have been burnt already and yet here I am again. Reaching the elevators, he presses the call button. I peek up at him and he's wearing his enigmatic half-smile. As the door opens, he releases my hand, to my great disappointment, and ushers me in. The doors close and I risk a second peek. He glances down at me, green eyes burning, and it's there in the air between us, that electricity… palpable. I can almost taste it, pulsing between us, drawing us together. *Oh my.* I gasp softly as I bask briefly in the intensity of this visceral, primal attraction.

"I feel it too," he says softly, his eyes clouded, intense, and desire pools dark and deadly in my groin. He clasps my hand and grazes my knuckles with his thumb and all my muscles clench tightly, deliciously, deep in my belly. *Holy crow.* How can he still do this too me?

“Please don’t bite your lip Isabella,” he whispers.

I gaze up at him, releasing my lip. I want him, here, now, in the elevator. How could I not?

“You know what it does to me,” he murmurs.

Oh, I can still affect him. My inner goddess stirs from her five-day sulk.

Abruptly, the doors open, breaking the spell, and we are on the roof. It's windy, and in spite of my black jacket I am cold. Edward puts his arm around me, pulling me into his side, and we hurry across to where Echo Charlie stands, rotor blades rotating slowly, in the center of the helipad.

A tall, blond, square-jawed man in a dark suit leaps out, and ducking low, runs towards us. Shaking hands with Edward, he shouts above the noise of the rotors.

“Ready to go, Sir. She's all yours!”

“All checks done?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You'll collect her around eight-thirty?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Taylor’s waiting for you at the front.”

“Thank you, Sir. Safe flight to Portland. Ma’am.” He salutes me.

Edward nods, and without releasing me, ducks down and leads me to the helicopter door.

Once inside, he straps me firmly into my harness, cinching the straps tight. He gives me a knowing look and his secret smile.

“This should keep you in your place,” he murmurs. “I must say I do like this harness on you. Don’t touch anything.”

I flush a deep crimson and he runs his index finger down my cheek before handing me the headphones. *I’d like to touch you, but you won’t let me,* I scowl at him. Besides, he’s pulled the straps so tight I can barely move. He sits in his seat and buckles himself in, whilst running through all his preflight checks.

He's just so… competent. It's very alluring. He puts on his headphones and flips a switch, and the rotors speed up, deafening. Turning, he gazes at me.

"Ready, baby?"

I hear his voice through the headphones.

"Yes."

He grins at me, and it's his boyish grin. Wow – I've not seen it for so long.

"Sea Tac tower this is Echo Charlie – Charlie, Hotel Echo, cleared for take off to Portland via PDX. Please confirm, over."

"Echo Charlie, you are clear. Sea Tac to call, proceed to 12,000 feet, heading SW 75 degrees. Air speed 165, over. "

"Roger tower, Echo Charlie set, over and out." He flips two switches, grasps the stick and the helicopter rises slowly and smoothly into the evening sky.

Seattle and my stomach drop away from us, and there's so much to see.

"We've chased the dawn, Isabella… now the dusk," his voice comes through on the headset. I turn to gape at him in awe. How is it that he can say the most romantic things? He smiles at me and I can't help but smile shyly back at him. *What does this mean?*

"As well as the evening sun. There's more to see this time," he says.

I gaze around me. Last time we flew to Seattle, it was dark. Oh my, the view is… literally out of this world, spectacular. Up amongst the tallest buildings… higher, higher.

"Escala's over there." He points towards the building. "Boeing there, and you can just see the Space Needle."

I crane my head. "I've never been."

"I'll take you. We can eat there."

What?

"Edward, we broke up."

"I know. I can still take you there. And feed you." He glares at me.

I shake my head at him, flushing.

“It’s very beautiful up here. Thank you.” I decide on the less confrontational approach.

“Impressive, isn’t it?”

“Impressive that you can do this.”

“Oh, flattery, Miss Swan. But I am a man of many talents.”

“I’m fully aware of that, Mr. Cullen.”

He turns and smirks at me, and for the first time in five days I relax… a little. Perhaps this won’t be so bad.

“How’s the new job?”

“Good, thank you. Interesting.”

“What’s your boss like?”

“Oh… he’s okay.”

How can I tell Edward that James makes me slightly uncomfortable?

Edward turns and gazes at me momentarily.

“What’s wrong?” he asks.

“Well, aside from the obvious, nothing.”

“The obvious?”

“Oh, Edward, you really are very obtuse sometimes.”

“Obtuse… me? I’m not sure I appreciate your tone, Miss Swan.”

“Well don’t, then.”

His lips twitch into a smile.

“I have missed your smart mouth,” he murmurs.

And I gasp. *I've missed you… all of you, not just your mouth* I want to say. But I keep quiet. I gaze out of the glass fishbowl that is the front of Echo Charlie as we continue south, the dusk on our right. The sun is low on the horizon, large, fiery orange, and I am Icarus again… flying far too close.

Chapter 54

The dusk has followed us from Seattle and the sky is opal. Pinks and aquamarines blended seamlessly, woven together as only Mother Nature knows how. It's a clear, crisp evening, and the lights of Portland twinkle and wink, welcoming us as Edward sets the helicopter down on the helipad. We are on top of the strange brown brick building in Portland we left less than three weeks ago. Jeez, it's been hardly any time at all. Yet I feel like I've known Edward for a lifetime. He powers down Echo Charlie, flipping various switches so the rotors stop, and eventually all I can hear is my own breathing through the headphones. *Hmmm…* it briefly reminds me of the Thomas Tallis experience. I blanch. I so don't want to go there right now. Edward unbuckles his harness and leans across to undo mine.

"Good trip, Miss Swan?" he asks mildly, green eyes glowing.

"Yes, thank you, Mr. Cullen," I reply politely.

"Well, let's go and see the boy's photos." He smiles down at me and I follow him out of Echo Charlie.

A grey haired, bearded man walks over to meet us, smiling broadly, and I recognize him as the old-timer from the last time we were here.

"Joe," Edward smiles, holding out his hand.

Joe shakes his hand warmly.

"Keep her safe for Stephan. He'll be along around eight or nine."

"Will do, Mr. Cullen. Ma'am," he nods at me. "Your car's waiting downstairs, Sir. Oh, and the elevator's out of order, you'll need to use the stairs."

"Thank you, Joe."

Edward takes my hand and we head to the emergency stairs.

"Good thing this is only three floors, in those heels," he mutters to me in disapproval.

No kidding. "Don't you like the boots?"

"I like them very much Isabella," he breathes, his gaze darkening, and I think he might say something else, but he stops. "Come. We'll take it slow. I don't want you falling and breaking your neck."

Our driver takes us in silence to the gallery. My anxiety has returned in full force and I realize that our time in Echo Charlie has been the eye of the storm. Edward is quiet, brooding, apprehensive even. Our earlier lighter mood has dissipated. There's so much I want to say, but… this journey is too short. Edward stares pensively out of the window.

"Jake is just a friend," I murmur.

Edward turns and gazes at me, his eyes darkest jade, guarded, giving nothing away. His mouth, oh his mouth, and unbidden, I remember his mouth on me… everywhere. My skin heats. He shifts in his seat and then frowns.

"Those beautiful eyes look too large in your face, Isabella. Please tell me you'll eat."

"Yes, Edward, I'll eat," I answer automatically, a platitude.

"I mean it."

"Do you now?" I cannot keep the condescension out of my voice. Honestly, the audacity of the man, this man who has put me through hell over the last few days. No, that's wrong, I've put myself through hell… No, it's him… I shake my head.

"I don't want to fight with you, Isabella. I want you back and I want you healthy," he says softly.

Oh… what? I blink at him…. What does that mean?

"But nothing's changed," I murmur and you're still fifty shades…

"Let's talk on the way back. We're here."

The car pulls up in front of the gallery and Edward gets out of the car, leaving me speechless. He opens the car door for me and I climb out.

"Why do you do that?" My voice is louder than I expected.

"Do what?" Edward is taken aback.

"Say something like that and then just stop."

"Isabella, we're here. Where you want to be. Let's do this and then talk. I don't particularly want a scene in the street."

I flush and glance around. I suppose it is a bit public. I press my lips together as he glares down at me.

"Okay," I mutter sulkily, and taking my hand he leads me into the building.

We are in a converted warehouse – brick walls, dark wood floors, white ceilings and white pipe work. It's airy and modern and there are several people wandering across the gallery floor, sipping wine and admiring Jake's work, and for a moment my troubles melt away, as I grasp that Jake has realized his dream. *Way to go, Jake… wow.*

"Good evening and welcome to Jacob Black's show." A young woman dressed entirely in black, with very short brown hair, bright red lipstick and large hooped earrings, greets us. She glances briefly at me, much longer than is strictly necessary at Edward, and then turns back to me, blinking slightly, and a little pink. I can feel my brow creasing. *He's mine – or was.* As her eyes regain their focus, she blinks again.

"Oh it's you, Bella. We'll want your take on all this too." Grinning, she hands me a brochure and directs me towards a table laden with drinks and nibbles. *How does she know my name?*

"You know her?" Edward frowns.

I shake my head, equally puzzled. He shrugs, distracted. "What would you like to drink?"

"I'll have a glass of white wine, thank you."

His brow furrows, but he holds his tongue and heads for the drinks table.

"Bella!"

Jake comes barreling through a throng of people. Oh my… He's wearing a suit. He looks… good, and he's beaming at me. He enfolds me in his arms, hugging me hard. And it's all I can do not to burst into tears. My friend… my only friend. Tears pool in my eyes.

"Bells, I'm so glad you made it," he breathes in my ear, then pauses, and suddenly holds me by my shoulders at arm's length, staring at me.

"What?"

"Hey… are you okay..? You look... well, odd. Are you thinner?"

I blink back my tears.

"Jake, I'm fine. I'm just so happy for you." *Holy crap, not him too*. I have to hold it together… "Congratulations on the show." My voice wavers, as I can see his concern etched in his oh-so-familiar face.

"How did you get here?" he asks softly.

"Edward brought me," I murmur, suddenly apprehensive.

"Oh." Jake's face falls and he releases me. "Where is he?" His expression darkens.

"Over there, fetching drinks." I nod in Edward's direction, and see he's exchanging pleasantries with someone waiting in line. He glances up when I look his way and our eyes lock. And in that brief moment, I am paralyzed, staring at this beautiful man, who gazes at me with some unfathomable emotion, hot, burning. *Oh my*. We are lost in each other, *and he wants me back*. Holy fuck. And deep down, sweet joy unfurls slowly, like a morning glory, in the early dawn.

"Oh, Bella!" Jake distracts me and I'm dragged back to the here and now. "I am so glad you came. Listen, I should warn you…"

Suddenly, he's cut off by Miss Very Short Hair and Red Lipstick.

"Jake, the journalist from The Portland Printz is here to see you. Come." She gives me a polite smile.

"How cool is this? The fame," he grins at me and I can't help but grin back. He's so happy. "Catch you later, Bells." He kisses my cheek and I watch him stroll over to a young woman standing by a tall, lanky photographer.

Jake's photographs are everywhere, and blown up – massively, in some cases; monochromes and colors. There's an ethereal beauty to many of the landscapes. In one, taken out near the lake at Vancouver, it's early evening, and pink clouds are reflected in the stillness of the water. Briefly, I'm transported… the tranquility, the peace… it's so serene, it's stunning.

Edward joins me and I take a quick deep breath and swallow, trying to recover some of my equilibrium. He hands me my glass of white wine.

"Does it come up to scratch?" My voice sounds more normal.

He looks quizzically at me.

"The wine."

“No. Rarely does at these kind of events. The boy’s quite talented, isn’t he?” Edward is admiring the lake photo.

“Why else do you think I asked him to take your portrait?” I can’t help the pride in my voice. His eyes glide impassively from the photograph to me.

“Edward Cullen?”

The photographer from The Portland Printz approaches Edward.

“Can I have a picture, Sir?”

“Sure.” Edward hides his scowl. I step back but he grabs my hand and pulls me to his side. The photographer looks at both of us and can’t hide his surprise.

“Mr. Cullen, thank you.” He takes a couple of snaps. “Miss…?” he asks

“Swan,” I murmur.

“Thank you, Miss Swan.”

He scurries off.

“I looked for pictures of you with dates on the Internet. There were none. That’s why Rose thought you were gay.”

Edward’s mouth twitches with a smile.

“Oh, that explains the question. No, I don’t do dates Isabella… only with you. But you know that.” He looks bemused.

“So you never took your…” I glance around nervously. “Subs out?”

“Sometimes. Not on dates. Shopping, you know.”

Oh, so just in the RRoP and his apartment. I don’t know what to feel about that.

“Just you, Isabella,” he whispers.

I blush and stare down at my fingers. In his own way, he does care about me.

“Your friend here seems more of a landscape man, not portraits. Let’s look around.” He holds his hand out to me and I take it.

We wander past a few more prints and I notice a couple nodding at me, looking at me oddly. Must be because I'm with Edward. And a young man is blatantly staring. Odd! We turn the corner, and now I can see why I've been getting all these strange looks. Hanging on the far wall are seven huge portraits of... me.

I stare blankly at them, stupefied, the blood draining from my face. Me pouting, laughing, scowling, serious, amused... All in super close up, all in black and white. *Holy crap*. I remember Jake messing with the camera on a couple of occasions when he was visiting, or when I'd been out with him as driver and photographer's assistant. He took snapshots, I thought, not these… invasive candids.

I glance up at Edward, who is staring, transfixed, at each of the pictures in turn.

"Seems I'm not the only one," he mutters cryptically, his mouth settling into a hard line. I think he's angry. *Oh no.*

"Excuse me," he says, pinning me with his bright green gaze for a moment. He turns on his heel and heads to the reception desk. *What's his problem now?* I watch, mesmerized, as he talks animatedly with Short Hair And Red Lipstick. He fishes out his wallet and produces his credit card. *Shit*. He must have bought one of them.

"Hey, you're the muse. These photographs are terrific." A young man with a shock of bright blond hair startles me. I feel a hand at my elbow and Edward is back.

"You're a lucky guy." Blond Shock smirks at Edward, who gives him a cold stare.

"That I am," he mutters darkly, as he pulls me over to one side.

"Did you just buy one of these?"

"One of these?" he snorts, not taking his eyes off them.

Holy crap. "You bought more than one?"

"I bought them all, Isabella. I don't want some stranger ogling you in the privacy of their own home."

My first inclination is to laugh. "You'd rather it was you?" I scoff.

He glares down at me, momentarily confused, but I can see he's trying to hide his amusement.

"Frankly, yes."

“Pervert,” I mouth at him and bite my lower lip from inside my mouth to prevent my smile.

His mouth drops open slightly, and now his amusement is obvious. He strokes his chin thoughtfully. “Can’t argue with that assessment, Isabella.” He shakes his head at me and his eyes soften with humor.

“I’d discuss it further with you, but I’ve signed an NDA.”

He sighs, gazing at me and his eyes darken.

“What I’d like to do to your smart mouth,” he murmurs.

And I gasp, knowing full well what he means.

“You’re very rude.” I try to sound shocked, and succeed. *Does he have no boundaries?*

He smirks at me, amused, and then he frowns.

“You look very relaxed in these photographs, Isabella. I don’t see you like that very often.”

What? Change of subject. Talk about non-sequitur - from playful to serious.

I flush and glance down at my fingers. He tilts my head back and I gasp slightly at the contact with his long fingers.

“I want you that relaxed with me,” he whispers. All trace of humor has gone.

And deep inside me, something stirs, that joy, again. But how can this be? We have… issues.

“You have to stop intimidating me if you want that,” I blurt out.

“You have to learn to communicate and tell me how you feel,” he snaps back at me, eyes blazing.

I take a deep breath.

“Edward, you wanted me as a submissive. That’s where the problem lies. It’s in the definition of a submissive – you emailed it to me once.” I pause, trying to recall the wording. Oh yes… “I think the synonyms were, and I quote, ‘compliant, pliant, amenable, passive, tractable, resigned, patient, docile, tame, subdued’. I wasn’t supposed to look at you. Not talk to you, unless you gave me permission to do so. What do you expect?” I hiss at him.

He blinks at me and his frown deepens as I continue.

"It's very confusing being with you. You don't want me to defy you, but then you like my 'smart mouth'. You want obedience except when you don't, so you can punish me. I just don't' know which way is up when I'm with you."

He narrows his eyes. "Good point well made, as usual, Miss Swan," his voice is cold. "Come, let's go and eat."

"We've only been here for half an hour."

"You've seen the photos, you've spoken to the boy…"

"His name is Jake."

"You've spoken to Jake – the man who, if I am not mistaken, was trying to push his tongue into your mouth the last time I met him, while you were drunk and ill," he snarls.

"He's never hit me," I spit at him.

Edward scowls at me, and I can tell he's furious.

"That's a low blow, Isabella," he whispers menacingly.

I flush and Edward runs his hands through his hair, bristling with anger. I glare back at him.

"I'm taking you for something to eat. You're fading away in front of me. Find the boy, say goodbye."

"Please can we stay longer?"

"No. Go. Now. Say goodbye."

I glare at him, my blood boiling. Mr. Damned Control Freak. Angry is good. Angry is better than tearful. I drag my gaze away from him and scan the room for Jake. He's talking to a group of young women. I stalk off towards him, and away from Fifty. *Who the hell does he think he is?* Just because he brought me here I have to do as he says?

The girls are hanging on Jake's every word. One of them gasps as I approach, no doubt recognizing me from the portraits.

"Jake…"

"Bella! Excuse me, girls." Jake grins at them and puts him arm around me, and on some level I'm amused… Jake all smooth, impressing the ladies.

"You look mad," he says.

"I have to go," I mutter mulishly.

"You just got here."

"I know, but… Edward needs to get back. The pictures are fantastic, Jake. You're very talented."

He beams.

"Oh, well… it was so cool seeing you." He sweeps me into a big bear hug, spinning me slightly so that I can see Edward across the gallery. He's scowling at me, and I realize it's because I'm in Jake's arms. So in a very calculating move, I wrap my arms around Jake's neck. And I think Edward is going to expire. His glare darkens to something quite sinister and slowly he makes his way towards us.

"Thanks for the warning about the portraits of me," I mumble hastily.

"Oh shit, sorry Bells. Should have told you. D'you like them?"

"Errr… I don't know." I answer truthfully, momentarily knocked off-balance by his question.

"Well, I've sold them all already, so somebody likes them. How cool is that? You're a poster girl." He hugs me tighter still as Edward reaches us, glowering at me now, though fortunately Jake doesn't see.

Jake releases me. "Don't be a stranger, Bells. Oh, Mr. Cullen, good evening."

"Mr. Black, very impressive." Edward sounds icily polite. "I'm sorry we can't stay longer, but we need to head back to Seattle. Isabella?" He very subtly stresses the 'we' and takes my hand as he does so.

"Bye, Jake. Congratulations again." I give him a quick kiss on the cheek and before I know it, Edward is dragging me out onto the street, and I can tell he's boiling with silent wrath… but so am I.

He looks quickly up and down the street, then heads left and suddenly sweeps me into a side alley, abruptly pushing me up against a wall. He grabs my face between his hands, forcing me to look up, into his ardent determined eyes. I gasp, and his mouth swoops down,

and he's kissing me, violently. Briefly, our teeth clash, then his tongue is in my mouth. Desire explodes like the Fourth of July throughout my body and I'm kissing him back, matching his fervor, my hands knotting in his hair, pulling it… It must be painful. He groans, a low sexy sound in the back of his throat that reverberates through me. His hand moves down my body to the top of my thigh, his fingers digging into my flesh, through the plum dress. Holy fuck, and I pour all the angst and heartbreak of the last few days into this kiss, binding him to me, and it hits me – in this moment of blinding passion, he's doing the same. *He feels the same.*

He breaks off the kiss, panting. His eyes luminous with desire, firing the already heated blood that is pounding through my body. My mouth is slack, trying to drag precious air into my lungs.

"You. Are. Mine," he snarls, emphasizing each word. He pushes away from me and bends, hands on his knees, like he's run a marathon. "For the love of God, Bella."

I lean against the wall, panting, trying to control the riotous reaction in my body, trying to find my equilibrium again.

"I'm sorry," I whisper once my breath has returned.

"You should be. I know what you were doing. Do you want the photographer, Isabella? He obviously has feelings for you."

I flush and shake my head. "No. He's just a friend."

"I have spent all my adult life trying to avoid any extreme emotion, and yet you… you bring out feelings in me that are completely alien. It's very," he frowns, grasping for the word. "Unsettling. I like control, Bella, and around you, that just…" He stands, his gaze intense. "... evaporates." He waves his hand vaguely, then runs it through his hair and takes a deep breath. He clasps my hand.

"Come. We need to talk, and you need to eat."

Chapter 55

He leads me into a small, intimate restaurant.

"This place will have to do," Edward grumbles. "We don't have much time." The restaurant looks fine to me. Wooden chairs, linen tablecloths and walls the same color as Edward's playroom, deep, blood red. Small gilt mirrors are randomly placed, white candles and small vases of white roses. Actually, it's very romantic. Ella Fitzgerald croons softly in the background about this thing called love. The waiter leads us to a table for two in a small alcove, and I sit, apprehensive, wondering what he's going to say.

"We don't have long," Edward says to the waiter as we sit. "So we'll each have sirloin steak, cooked medium, béarnaise sauce if you have it, fries and green vegetables, whatever the chef has – and bring me the wine list."

"Certainly, Sir." The waiter, obviously taken aback by Edward's cool calm efficiency, scuttles off. Edward places his Blackberry on the table. Jeez, don't I get a choice?

"And if I don't like steak?"

He sighs. "Don't start, Isabella."

"I am not a child, Edward."

"Well, stop acting like one."

And it's as if he's slapped me. I blink at him. So this is how it will be… an agitated, fraught conversation, albeit in a very romantic setting. Certainly no hearts and flowers.

"I'm a child because I don't like steak?" I mutter at him, shocked.

"For deliberately making me jealous. It's a childish thing to do. Have you no regard for your friend's feelings, leading him on like that?"

He presses his lips together in a thin line and glowers at me as the waiter returns with the wine list.

I blush. I hadn't thought of that. Oh no, poor Jake. I certainly don't want to encourage him. Suddenly, I feel mortified.

Edward glances at the wine list.

"Would you like to choose the wine?" he asks, raising his eyebrows at me expectantly. Arrogance personified. He knows I know nothing about wine.

"You choose," I answer mulishly.

"Two glasses of the Borossa Valley Shiraz, please."

"Err, we only sell that wine by the bottle, Sir."

"A bottle then," Edward snaps.

"Sir." He retreats, chastened… and I don't blame him. I frown at Fifty. What's eating him? *Oh… me probably,* and somewhere in the depths of my psyche, my Inner Goddess rises sleepily, stretches and smiles. She's been asleep for a while.

"You're very grumpy."

He gazes at me impassively. "I wonder why that is?" he murmurs with irony.

"Well, it's good to set the right tone for an intimate and honest discussion about the future, wouldn't you say?" I smile at him sweetly.

His mouth presses into a hard line, but then, almost reluctantly, his lips lift slightly, and I know he's trying to stifle his smile.

"I'm sorry," he says.

"Apology accepted. And I'm pleased to inform you I haven't decided to become a vegetarian since we last ate."

"Since that ***was*** the last time you ate, I think that's a moot point."

"There's that word again… moot."

"Moot," he mouths and his eyes soften with humor. He runs his hand through his hair and he's serious again. "Bella, the last time we spoke, you left me. I'm a little nervous. I've told you I want you back, and you've said – nothing." He gazes at me intently, expectantly. His candor is totally disarming. *Holy crap. What to say?*

"I've missed you, really missed you, Edward. The past five days have been… difficult." I swallow, and a lump in my throat swells as I recall my burning anguish since I left him. These last few days have been the worst in my life. Nothing comes close. Then reality punches home, winding me in the gut. "But nothing's changed. I can't be what you want me to be," I whisper, squeezing the words out past the lump in my throat.

"You are what I want you to be," he says softly.

"No, Edward, I'm not."

"You're upset because of what happened last time. I behaved… stupidly, and you… Why didn't you safe word, Isabella?" His tone has changed, becoming accusatory.

What? Whoa, change of direction. I flush, and blink at him.

"Answer me."

"I forgot," I whisper, suddenly ashamed, shrugging apologetically. Jeez, perhaps we could have avoided all this heartache.

"You forgot!" he gasps with horror, grasping the sides of the table and glaring at me. I wither under his stare. Oh shit, he's furious. My inner goddess glares at me too, she's none too happy either. *See, you brought all this on yourself!*

"How can I trust you?" he says quietly. "Ever?"

The waiter arrives with our wine. We sit staring at each other, brown eyes to green, saying nothing, whilst he removes the cork with unnecessary flourish and pours a little wine into Edward's glass. Automatically, Edward reaches out and takes a sip.

"That's fine." His voice is curt.

Gingerly, the waiter fills our glasses and placing the bottle on the table beats a hasty retreat. Edward has not taken his eyes off me the whole time. I am the first to crack, breaking eye contact, picking up my glass and taking a rather too large sip. *Hmmm… delicious.*

"I'm sorry," I whisper, and I feel suddenly… stupid. Surely I left because we're incompatible, and yet, I could have stopped him.

"Sorry for what?" he says quickly, alarmed.

"Not using the safe word."

He closes his eyes, as if in relief. "Well, we might have avoided all this… suffering."

"You look fine." More than fine. You look… *like you.*

"Appearances can be deceptive," he says quietly. "I am not fine. I feel like the sun has set and not risen for five days, Bella. I'm in perpetual night here."

My body inwardly sags at his admission. Oh my… *like me.*

"You said you'd never leave, and yet, the going gets tough and you're out the door."

"When did I say I'd never leave?"

"In your sleep. It was the most comforting thing I've heard in so long, Isabella. It made me relax."

Oh. My heart constricts, and I reach for my wine.

"You said you loved me," he whispers. "Is that now in the past tense?" I can hear the fear in his voice.

"No Edward, it's not."

He gazes at me, and he looks so vulnerable as he exhales slightly. "Good," he murmurs.

And I'm surprised by his admission. Seems he's had a change of heart. Last time I told him that, he was horrified. The waiter is back. Briskly, he places our plates in front of us and scuttles away.

Oh fuck… food.

"Eat," Edward commands.

Deep down I know I am hungry, but right now my stomach is in knots, sitting across from the only man I have ever loved and debating our future does not promote a healthy appetite. I look dubiously at my food.

"So help me God, Isabella, if you don't eat, I will take you across my knee here in this restaurant. And it will have nothing to do with my sexual gratification. Eat!"

Okay, keep your hair on, Cullen. My subconscious stares at me over her half-moon specs. She is so in agreement with Fifty Shades.

"Okay, I'll eat. Stow your twitching palm please."

He doesn't smile but continues to glare at me. Gingerly, I lift my knife and fork and slice into my steak. oh, it's mouthwateringly good. I am so hungry. I chew and he visibly relaxes.

We eat our supper in silence. The music's changed. Someone I don't know, a soft voiced woman, sings.

I wonder why it is I don't argue like this with anyone but you

We do it all the time

Blowing out my mind.

I glance at Fifty Shades. He's eating, and watching me, hunger, longing, anxiety combined in one hot look.

You've got this look I can't describe, you make me feel like I'm alive

Jeez, that look.

Just like a star across my sky

Just like an angel off the page

You have appeared to my life and

I'll never be the same

"Do you know who's singing?" I try for some normal conversation.

Edward pauses and listens.

"No, but she's good, whoever she is."

"I like her, too."

He smiles at me. Finally, his private enigmatic smile. What's he planning?

"What?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "Eat up," he says mildly.

I have eaten half the food on my plate. I cannot eat any more. How can I negotiate this?

"I can't manage any more. Have I eaten enough for Sir?"

He stares at me impassively, not answering, then glances at his watch.

"I am really full," I add, taking a sip of the delicious wine.

"We have to go shortly. Taylor's here and you have to be up for work in the morning."

"So do you."

"I function on a lot less sleep than you do, Isabella. Well, at least you've eaten something."

"Aren't we going back via Echo Charlie?"

"No, I thought I might have a drink. Taylor will collect us. Besides, this way I have you in the car all to myself, for a few hours at least. What can we do but talk?"

Oh, that's his plan.

Edward summons the waiter to ask for the check, then picks up his BlackBerry and makes a call.

"We're at Le Picotin, South West 3rd Avenue." He hangs up.

Jeez, he's curt over the phone.

"You're very brusque with Taylor. In fact, with most people."

"I just get to the point quickly, Isabella."

"You haven't got to the point this evening. Nothing's changed, Edward."

"I have a proposition for you."

"This started with a proposition."

"A different proposition."

The waiter returns, and Edward hands over his credit card without checking the bill. He gazes at me speculatively while the waiter swipes his card. Edward's phone buzzes once and he peers at it.

He has a proposition… what now? Various scenarios run through my mind: kidnap, working for him. No, nothing makes sense. Edward finishes paying.

"Come. Taylor's outside."

We stand and he takes my hand.

"I don't want to lose you, Isabella," he murmurs. He kisses my knuckles tenderly and I feel the touch of his lips to my skin, right through my body.

Outside, the Mercedes is waiting. Edward opens my door and I climb in, sinking into the plush leather, then he goes round to the driver's side. Taylor steps out of the car and they talk briefly. This isn't their usual protocol… I'm curious, what are they talking about? Moments later they both clamber in, and I glance at Edward, wearing his impassive face as he stares ahead. I allow myself a brief moment to examine his godlike profile. Straight nose, sculptured full lips, hair falling deliciously over his forehead. This divine man was surely not meant for me. Soft music suddenly fills the rear of the car, an orchestral piece that I don't know, and Taylor pulls into the light traffic, heading for the I-5 and Seattle. Edward shifts to face me.

"As I was saying, Isabella, I have a proposition for you," he says softly.

I glance nervously at Taylor.

"Taylor can't hear you," Edward reassures me.

"What?"

"Taylor," Edward calls. Taylor doesn't respond. He calls again, still no response. Edward leans over and taps his shoulder. Taylor removes an earbud I hadn't noticed.

"Yes, Sir?"

"Thank you Taylor, It's okay, resume your listening."

"Sir."

"Happy now? He's listening to his iPod. Forget he's here. I do."

"Did you deliberately ask him to do that?"

"Yes."

Oh. "Okay, your proposition." I listen attentively. Edward looks suddenly determined and business like. *Holy shit, we're negotiating a deal.*

"Let me ask you something first. Do you want a regular vanilla relationship, with no kinky fuckery at all?"

My mouth drops open. A regular vanilla relationship! Holy crow. "Kinky fuckery?" I squeak.

"Kinky fuckery."

“I can’t believe you said that.” I glance nervously at Taylor.

“Well, I did. Answer me,” he says calmly.

I flush. My Inner Goddess is down on bended knee with her hands clasped in supplication, begging me.

“I like your kinky fuckery,” I whisper.

“That’s what I thought. So what don’t you like?”

Not being able to touch you. You enjoying my pain. The bite of the belt.

“The threat of cruel and unusual punishment.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you have all those… things in your playroom, the canes, and whips and stuff, and they frighten the living daylights out of me. I don’t want you to use them on me.”

“Okay, so no whips or canes or belts for that matter,” he says sardonically.

I look at him puzzled. “Are you attempting to redefine the hard limits?”

“Not as such, I’m just trying to understand you. Get a clearer picture of what you do and don’t like.”

“Fundamentally, Edward, it’s your joy in inflicting pain on me that’s difficult for me to handle. And the idea that you’ll do it because I have crossed some arbitrary line”

“But it’s not arbitrary. The rules are written down.”

“I don’t want a set of rules.”

“None at all?”

“No rules.” I shake my head, but my heart is in my mouth. Where is he going with this?

“But you don’t mind if I spank you?”

“Spank me with what?”

“This.” He holds up his hand.

I squirm uncomfortably. “No, not really. Especially with those silver balls…” Thank heavens it’s dark. My face is flaming, and my voice trails off as I recall that night. Oh my. Yeah, *I’d do that again.*

He smirks at me. “Yes, that was fun.”

“More than fun,” I mutter.

“So you can deal with some pain.”

I shrug. “Yes, I suppose.” Oh, where is he going with this? My anxiety level has shot up several magnitudes on the Richter scale.

He strokes his chin, deep in thought. “Isabella, I want to start again. Do the vanilla thing, and then maybe, once you trust me more, and I trust you to be honest and to communicate with me, we could move on. Do some of the things that I like to do.”

I stare at him, stunned. No thoughts in my head at all, like a computer crash.

He gazes at me anxiously, but I can’t see him clearly, we’re shrouded in the Oregon darkness. And it occurs to me finally… this is it. He wants the light. Oh my. But can I ask him to do this for me? And don’t I like the dark? Some dark, sometimes… Memories of the Thomas Tallis night drift invitingly through my mind.

“But what about punishments?” I ask.

“No punishments.” He shakes his head. “None.”

“And the rules?”

“No rules.”

“None at all? But you have needs…”

“I need you more, Isabella. These last few days have been purgatory. All my instincts tell me to let you go, I don’t deserve you. Those photos the boy took, I can see how he sees you. You look so… untroubled. Beautiful. Bot that you’re not beautiful now, but here you sit, and I can see your pain, and it’s so hard knowing that I’m the one who has made you feel this way. But I’m a selfish man. I’ve wanted you since you fell into my office. You are… exquisite, honest, warm, strong, witty, beguilingly innocent. The list is endless. I am in awe of you. I want you, and the thought of anyone else having you is like a knife twisting in my blackened soul.”

My mouth goes dry. Holy shit. My subconscious nods with satisfaction. If that isn't a declaration of love, I don't know what is. And the words tumble out of me, a dam breached.

"Edward, why do you think you have a blackened soul? I would never say that. Sad, maybe, but you are a good man. I can see that. You're generous, you're kind, you've never lied to me. And I haven't tried very hard. Last Saturday was such a shock to my system, it was my wake-up call. I realized that you had been easy on me, and that I couldn't be the person you wanted me to be, and then, after I left, it dawned on me: the physical pain you inflicted was not as bad as the pain of losing you. I do want to please you, but it's hard."

"You please me all the time," he whispers. "How often do I have to tell you that?"

"I never know what you're thinking. Sometimes you're so closed, like an Island State. You intimidate me. That's why I keep quiet. I don't know which way your mood is going to go. It swings from north to south and back again in a nanosecond. It's confusing, and you won't let me touch you, when I want to, so much, just to show you how much I love you."

He blinks at me in the darkness, warily I think, and I can resist him no longer. I scramble into his lap, taking him by surprise, and take his head in my hands.

"I love you, Edward. And you're prepared to do all this for me. I'm the one who is undeserving. I'm just sorry that I can't do all those things for you. Maybe with time, I don't know, but… Yes, I accept your proposition. Where do I sign?"

He snakes his arms around me and crushes me to him.

"Oh, Bella," he breathes, and I can feel the relief coursing through him.

We sit and hold each other, listening to the music – a stirring piano piece – mirroring the emotions in the car. The sweet tranquil calm after the storm.

I snuggle into his arms, resting my head in the crook of his neck. He gently strokes my back.

"Touching is a hard limit for me Isabella," he whispers.

"I know. I wish I understood why…"

After an age, he sighs, and in a soft voice he says, "I had a horrific childhood. I think one of the crack-whore's pimps…" his voice trails off. "I can remember that."

I feel the shudder that goes through him.

"Was she abusive? Your mother?"

"Not that I remember. She was neglectful. I think it was me who looked after her. When she finally killed herself, it took four days for someone to raise the alarm, and find us. I remember that."

I cannot contain my gasp of horror. *Holy mother fuck.* I feel nauseous.

"Well, that's pretty… fucked-up," I whisper.

"Fifty shades."

I turn my head and press my lips against his neck, seeking and offering solace. He smells heavenly, my favorite fragrance in the entire world… Edward. He tightens his arms around me and kisses my hair, and I sit wrapped in his embrace as Taylor speeds into the night.

When I wake, we're driving through Seattle.

"Hey," Edward says softly.

"Sorry," I murmur as I sit up, blinking and stretching. I am still in his arms, on his lap.

"I like to watch you sleep."

"Did I say anything?"

"No. We're nearly at your place."

Oh. "We're not going to yours?"

"No."

I sit right up and gaze at him. "Why not?"

"Because you have work tomorrow."

"Oh." I pout.

He smirks at me. "Why, did you have something in mind?"

I flush. "Well… maybe."

He chuckles. "Isabella, I am not going to touch you again. Not until you beg me to."

"What?!"

"So that you'll start communicating with me. Next time we make love, you're going to have to tell me exactly what you want, in fine detail."

"Oh…"

Edward moves me off his lap as Taylor pulls up outside my apartment. He climbs out and holds the car door open for me.

"I have something for you." He moves to the back of the car, opens the trunk, and pulls out a large rectangular gift-wrapped box. What the hell is this?

"Open it when you get inside."

"You're not coming in?"

"No, Isabella."

"So when will I see you?"

"Tomorrow."

"My boss wants me to go for drink with him tomorrow."

Edward's face hardens. "Does he now?" he says softly.

"To celebrate my first week."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"I could pick you up from there."

"Okay. I'll text you."

"Good."

He walks me to the lobby door and waits while I dig my keys out of my bag. As I unlock the door, he leans forward and cups my chin in his fingers, tilting my head back. His mouth hovers over me and, closing his eyes, he runs a trail of kisses from the corner of my eye to the corner of my mouth.

Oh my. My insides melt and unfurl.

"Until tomorrow," he breathes.

"Goodnight, Edward," I whisper, and I can hear the need in my voice.

He smiles slightly at me. "In you go." I walk through the lobby carrying my mysterious parcel.

"Laters, Baby," he calls, then turns on his heel, and with his easy grace heads back to the car.

Once in the apartment, I open the gift box. The Mac, the BlackBerry and now a brand-new iPod. Picking it up, I turn it over, and engraved on the back I read:

Isabella, this is for you
I know what you want to hear
This music says it for me
Edward

Chapter 56

Holy crow. I have an Edward Cullen mix-tape in the guise of a high-end iPod. I shake my head in disapproval at the expense, but deep down I love it. Switching it on, I scroll through the songs. The list makes me smile. Thomas Tallis – I'm not going to forget that in a hurry. After all, I heard it twice while he flogged and fucked me. Witchcraft – oh my. My grin gets wider, dancing around the great room. The Bach Marcello piece – oh no, that's way too sad for my mood right now. Hmmm, Jeff Buckley – yeah, I've heard of him. Snow Patrol, my favorite band, and one song called Principles of Lust by Enigma. How Edward, I smirk. And another called Possession. Oh yes, very Fifty Shades. And a few more I have never heard. I plug in the headphones and select one at random. A woman, Nelly Furtado. Her voice a silken scarf wrapping around me, enveloping me. I lie down on my bed. What is Edward trying to say?

Then I see you standing there

Wanting more from me

And all I can do is try

-

Oh my. Try… for more. As the song continues, I lie staring at the ceiling, drinking in each word.

-

All of the things we want each other to be

We never will be And that's wonderful, and that's life

And that's you, baby This is me, baby

And we are, we are, we are, we are Free

In our love We are free in our love

-

Love. *We are free in our love*. Holy shit. Tears spring to me eyes. I quickly scroll to another… Coldplay, I know them, and this track, but I've never really listened to the lyrics before. I close my eyes and let the words wash over and through me.

-

Come up to meet you, tell you I'm sorry

You don't know how lovely you are

I had to find you Tell you I need you

Tell you I've set you apart

Tell me your secrets

And ask me your questions

Oh, let's go back to the start

-

And tears flow. I can’t stop them. Is this an invitation? Will he answer my questions? Am I reading too much into this? I am probably reading too much into this… My subconscious nods at me, her expression full of pity.

-

Oh tell me you love me

Come back and haunt me

Oh and I rush to the start

-

I dash my tears away. I have to email him. I sit up and fetch the mean machine.

-

Nobody said it was easy

Oh, it's such a shame for us to part

Nobody said it was easy

No one ever said it would be so hard

-

Coldplay continues and I sit cross-legged on my bed as the Mac powers up and I log in.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: IPOD
Date: 11 June 2009 23.56
To: Edward Cullen

You've made me cry again.
I love the songs.
I love you.
Goodnight.
Bella xx

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Ipod, What Ipod?
Date: 12 June 2009 00.03
To: Isabella Swan

If I was there, I would kiss away your tears.
But I'm not, so go to sleep.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

His response makes me smile. Still so bossy, still so Edward. Will that change, too? And I realize in that moment that I hope not. I like him like this, commanding, as long as I can stand up to him, without fear of punishment. *Hmmm.*

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Mr Grumpy
Date: 12 June 2009 00.07
To: Edward Cullen

You sound your usual bossy and possibly tense self, Mr. Cullen.
I know something that could ease that. But then, you're not here, you wouldn't let me stay, and you expect me to beg…
Dream on, Sir.
Bella xx

PS: I also note that you included the Stalker's Anthem, "Every Breath You Take". I do enjoy your sense of humor, but does Dr. Banner know?
PPS: If you don't know anything about the iPod… did Taylor do it?

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: All My Own Work…
Date: 12 June 2009 00.10
To: Isabella Swan

My Dearest Miss Swan
Spanking occurs in vanilla relationships too, you know. Usually consensually, and in a sexual context… but I am more than happy to make an exception.
Every game you play, every night you stay, I'll be watching you, O can't you see, You belong to me. Now, please go to sleep.
Incidentally – you will beg, trust me. And I look forward to it.

Edward Cullen
Tense CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

PS: Taylor had nothing to do with it.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Goodnight, Sweet Dreams
Date: 12 June 2009 00.12
To: Edward Cullen

Well, since you ask so nicely, and I like your delicious threat, I shall curl up with the iPod that you have fessed up to – ridiculous to deny it since it has your name on the back – and fall asleep listening to the music that says it for you.

Bxxx

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: One more request
Date: 12 June 2009 00.15
To: Isabella Swan

Dream of me.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

Dream of you, Edward Cullen? Always.

I change quickly into my pajamas, brush my teeth and clamber into bed. Slipping the earbuds in, I pull the flattened Echo Charlie balloon from underneath my pillow and hug it to me. I am brimming with joy, a stupid wide-mouthed grin on my face. What a difference a day can make. How am I ever going to sleep? Jose Gonzalez starts to sing a soothing melody with a hypnotic guitar riff, and I drift slowly into sleep, wondering idly if I should make a mix-tape for Edward… *hmmm.*

The one good thing about being car-less is that I can wear my iPod on the bus on the way to work, and listen to all the lovely tunes Edward has given me. By the time I arrive at the office, I have the most ludicrous grin on my face.

James glances up at me and does a double take.

"Good morning, Bella. You look… radiant."

I can feel the color creeping up my face. Holy crow. How inappropriate!

"I slept well, thank you James. Good morning to you."

His brow crinkles slightly. "Can you read these for me and have reports on them by lunchtime, please?" He hands me four manuscripts. At my horrified expression he adds, "Just first chapters."

"Sure." I smile with relief, and he gives me a broad smile in return.

I switch on the computer to start work, finishing my latte and eating a banana. There's an email from Edward.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: So Help Me…
Date: 12 June 2009 08.05
To: Isabella Swan

I do hope you've had breakfast.
Missed you last night.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Songs…
Date: 12 June 2009: 08.33
To: Edward Cullen

I am eating a banana as I type. I have not had breakfast for several days, so it is a step forward.
I love the Cibelle, and the Jeff Buckley, and Damien Rice… and you.
Now leave me alone. I am trying to work.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Is that all you've eaten?
Date: 12 June 2009 08.36
To: Isabella Swan

You can do better than that. You're going to need your energy for begging…

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Pest

Date: 12 June 2009: 08.39
To: Edward Cullen

Mr. Cullen, I am trying to work for a living… and it's you that will be begging.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Bring it On!
Date: 12 June 2009 08.36
To: Isabella Swan

Why Miss Swan, I love a challenge…

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I sit grinning like an idiot at the screen. But I need to read these chapters for James and write reports on all of them. Placing the manuscripts on my desk, I begin.

At lunchtime, I pop down to the deli next door for a pastrami sandwich. I listen to the Nitin Sawhney, some world music called Homelands – it's good. Mr. Cullen has an eclectic taste in music. I wander back listening to a classical piece, Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis, by Vaughn Williams. Oh, Fifty has a sense of humor, and I love him for it. Will this stupid grin ever leave my face?

The afternoon drags. In an unguarded moment, I email Edward.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Bored…
Date: 12 June 2009: 16.05
To: Edward Cullen

Twiddling my thumbs.
How are you?
What are you doing?

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: CEH Inc… Internships.
Date: 12 June 2009 16.15
To: Isabella Swan

You should have come to work for me.
You wouldn't be twiddling your thumbs. I am sure I could put them to better use.
I am doing the usual humdrum mergers and acquisitions. Today - acquisitions.
Your email at SIP is monitored.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

Oh shit. I had no idea. *How the hell does he know?* I scowl at the screen and quickly check the emails we've sent to and fro, deleting them as I do.

Promptly at 5:30 James is at my desk. It is 'dress down Friday' so he's wearing jeans and a black shirt. He looks very casual.

"So, drink, Bella? We usually like to go for a quick one at the bar across the street."

"We?" I ask, hopeful.

"Yeah, most of us go. You coming?"

For some unknown reason, which I don't want to examine too closely, relief floods through me.

"I'd love to. What's the bar called?"

"'50s.'"

"You're kidding."

He looks at me oddly. "No. Some significance for you?"

"No… sorry. I'll join you over there."

"What would you like to drink?"

"A beer, please."

"Cool."

I make my way to the powder room and email Edward from the BlackBerry.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: You'll Fit Right In
Date: 12 June 2009: 17.36
To: Edward Cullen

We are going to a bar called Fiftys.
The rich seam of humor that I could mine from this… it's endless.
I look forward to seeing you there, Mr. Cullen.

Bx

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Hazards
Date: 12 June 2009 17.38
To: Isabella Swan

Mining is a very, very dangerous occupation.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Hazards?
Date: 12 June 2009: 17.40
To: Edward Cullen

Mr. Cullen! Are you threatening me?

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Moi?
Date: 12 June 2009 17.42
To: Isabella Swan

Would I dare, Miss Swan?
I'll see you shortly.
Sooners than laters, Baby.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I check myself in the mirror. Yes, I have a little more color in my cheeks, a bright look in my eye. Oh, the Edward Cullen effect. I grin at myself and straighten my royal blue blouse, the one Taylor bought me. I am wearing jeans today, too. Most of the women in the office wear either jeans or floaty skirts. I will need to invest in a floaty skirt or two. I still have to bank the check Edward gave me.

As I head out of the building, I hear my name called.

"Miss Swan?"

I turn expectantly and am confronted by an ashen young woman, who approaches me. She looks like a ghost – she's so pale, and strangely blank.

"Miss Isabella Swan?" she repeats, and none of her features move, it seems.

"Yes?"

She stops, staring at me from about three feet away on the sidewalk, and I stare back, immobilized. Who is she? What does she want?

"Can I help you?" I ask. How does she know my name?

"No. I just wanted to look at you," she says softly.

She has dark hair like me, a contrast to her skin. Her eyes are hazel, but flat, no life in them. Her beautiful face is pale, and etched with a haunted expression.

"Sorry, you have me at a disadvantage," I say politely, nervous now.

On closer inspection, she looks… odd. Disheveled, uncared for. Her clothes look two sizes too big, including her designer trench coat.

She laughs. It's a strange discordant sound.

"What do you have that I don't?" she asks sadly.

I feel a frisson of fear.

"I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"Me? I'm nobody." She lifts her arm to drag her hand through her shoulder length hair, and as she does, the sleeve of her trench coat rides up, and I notice the bandage around her wrist.

Holy shit.

"Good day, Miss Swan." Turning she walks away, up the street. I stand, rooted to the spot, watching her as she disappears from view, lost amongst the workers pouring out of their various offices.

Holy… fuck. What was that about? Confused, I cross the street to the bar. And from deep within my mind, my subconscious hisses at me. *She's something to do with Edward.*

50s is cavernous, impersonal bar with baseball pennants and posters hung on the wall.

James is at the bar with Victoria, Charlotte, the other commissioning editor, two guys from finance, and Claire from reception. She is wearing her trademark silver hooped earrings.

"Hi Bella!" James hands me a bottle of Bud.

"Cheers. Thank you," I murmur, still shaken by my encounter with Ghost Girl.

"Cheers." We clink bottles.

He continues his conversation with Victoria, and Claire smiles sweetly at me.

"So, how has your first week been?" she asks.

"Good, thank you. Everyone seems very friendly."

"You seem much happier today."

I flush. "Well, it's Friday," I mutter quickly. "So, have you any plans this weekend?"

My patented distraction technique works. I'm saved. Claire turns out to be one of seven kids, and she's going to a big family get-together in Tacoma. She becomes quite animated and I realize I haven't spoken to any women my own age since Rose left for Barbados.

Absently, I wonder how Rose is, and Emmett. I must remember to ask Edward if he's heard from him. Oh, and Jasper will be back next Tuesday, staying in our apartment. I can't imagine Edward is going to be happy about that. My earlier encounter with Strange Ghost Girl slips further from my mind.

During my conversation with Claire, Victoria hands me another beer.

"Thanks," I smile at her.

Claire is very easy to talk to. She likes to talk, and before I know it, I am on my third beer, courtesy of one of the guys in finance.

When Victoria leaves, James joins Claire and me. *Where is Edward?* One of the finance guys engages Claire in conversation.

"So, Bella… think you made the right decision coming here?" James's voice is soft, and he's standing that bit too close. But then he has a tendency to do this with everyone, even in the office. *I'm reading too much into this!* I admonish myself. What does that question mean?

"I've enjoyed myself this week, thank you, James. Yes, I think I made the right decision."

"You're a very bright girl, Bella. You'll go far."

I blush. "Thank you," I mutter, because I don't know what else to say.

"Do you live far?"

"The Pike Market district."

"Oh, not far from me…" Smiling, he moves even closer, and leans against the bar, effectively trapping me. "Do you have any plans this weekend?"

"Well… err..."

I feel him before I see him. It's like my whole body is highly attuned to his presence, it relaxes and ignites at the same time – a weird, internal duality – and I sense that strange pulsing electricity. Edward drapes his arm around my shoulder in a seemingly casual display of affection, but I know differently. He is staking a claim, and on this occasion, it's very welcome. Softly, he kisses my hair.

"Hello, baby," he breathes.

I can't help but feel relieved, safe, and… excited, with his arm around me. He draws me to his side and I glance up at him while he stares at James, his expression impassive. Turning his attention to me, he gives me a brief crooked smile followed by a swift kiss. He's wearing his navy pinstriped jacket over jeans and an open white shirt. He looks edible.

James shuffles back uncomfortably.

"James, this is Edward," I mumble, apologetically. *Why am I apologizing?* "Edward, James."

"I'm the boyfriend," Edward says with a small, cool, smile as he shakes James's hand, but I sense that the smile doesn't touch his eyes.

I glance up at James who is mentally assessing the fine specimen of manhood in front of him.

"I'm the boss," James replies arrogantly. "Bella did mention an ***ex***-boyfriend."

Oh fuck. You don't want to play this game with Fifty.

"Well, no longer ex," Edward replies calmly. "Come on baby, time to go."

"Please, stay and join us for a drink," James says smoothly.

I don't think that's a good idea. *Why is this so uncomfortable?* I glance at Claire, who is, of course staring, open-mouthed and with frankly carnal appreciation, at Edward. Oh… when will I stop caring about the effect he has on other women?

"We have plans," Edward replies, with his enigmatic smile.

We do? And I feel a frisson of anticipation.

"Another time, perhaps," he adds. "Come," he says lightly to me as he takes my hand.

"See you Monday." I smile at James, Claire, and the guys from finance, trying hard to ignore James's less-than-pleased expression, and follow Edward out of the door.

Taylor is at the wheel of the Mercedes waiting at the curb.

"Why did that feel like a pissing contest?" I ask Edward innocently as he opens the car door for me.

“You’re catching on,” he murmurs appreciatively. “Because it was.”

He shuts my door.

“Hello, Taylor.”

“Miss Swan,” Taylor acknowledges with a genial smile.

Edward slides in beside me and, clasping my hand, gently kisses my knuckles while gazing at me.

“Hello,” he says softly.

My cheeks turn pink, knowing that Taylor can hear us, grateful that he can’t see the scorching, panty-combusting look that Edward is giving me. It takes all my self-restraint not to leap on him, right here and now, in the back seat of the car. *Oh, the back seat of the car…hmmm.* My inner goddess strokes her chin gently in quiet contemplation.

“Hi,” I breathe, my mouth dry.

“What would you like to do this evening?”

“I thought you said we had plans.”

“Oh, I know what I’d like to do, Isabella. I’m asking you what you want to do.”

I can’t help but beam at him.

“I see,” he says with a wickedly salacious grin. “So... begging it is, then.”

Chapter 57

"So, do you want to beg at my place or yours?" He cocks his head to one side and smiles his oh-so-sexy smile at me.

"I think you're being very presumptuous, Mr. Cullen. But by way of a change, we could go to my apartment." I bite my lip deliberately and his expression darkens.

"Taylor, Miss Swan's please."

"Sir," Taylor acknowledges, and he heads off into the traffic.

"So how has your day been?" he asks softly.

"Good. Yours?"

"Good, thank you."

We are sitting in the back of the Mercedes, unable to take our eyes off each other, and grinning like idiots. Edward kisses my hand again.

"You look lovely," he says.

"As do you." I grin back at him.

"Your boss, James Smith. Is he good at his job?"

Whoa! What's this sudden change in direction? I frown slightly.

"Why? This isn't about your pissing contest?"

Edward smirks at me.

"That man wants into your panties, Isabella," he says dryly.

Oh. I think I go crimson and my mouth drops open. My subconscious inhales sharply, shocked.

"Well, he can want all he likes. Why are we even having this conversation? You know I have no interest in him whatsoever. He's just my boss…"

"That's the point. He wants what's mine. I need to know if he's good at his job."

I shrug. “I think so.” *Where is he going with this?*

“Well, he’d better leave you alone or he’ll find himself on his ass on the sidewalk.”

“Oh, Edward, what are you talking about? He hasn’t done anything wrong.”

As such… yet. He just stands too close.

“He makes one move, you tell me. It’s called gross moral turpitude, or sexual harassment.”

“It was just a drink after work.”

“I mean it. One move and he’s out.”

“You don’t have that kind of power.” *Honestly!* And before I can roll my eyes at him, realization hits me with the force of speeding freight truck. *Holy fuck.*

“Do you? Edward?”

Edward gives me his enigmatic smile.

“You’re buying the company,” I whisper in horror.

His smile looks less certain hearing the panic in my voice.

“Not exactly,” he says cautiously.

“You’ve bought it… SIP… already.”

He blinks at me, warily. “Possibly.”

“You have or you haven’t?”

“Have.”

What the hell?

“Why?” I whisper, beyond appalled. *Oh, this just is too much.*

“Because I can, Isabella. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe.”

“But you said you wouldn’t interfere in my career!”

“And I won’t.”

I snatch my hand out of his.

"Edward…" Words fail me.

"Are you mad at me?"

"Yes. Of course I'm mad at you. I mean, what kind of responsible business executive makes decisions based on who they are currently fucking?"

I blanch and glance nervously at Taylor. What a time to have a brain-to-mouth filter malfunction. *Isabella!* My subconscious glares at me. Edward opens his mouth, then closes it again and scowls at me, and I glare at him. The atmosphere in the car has gone from warm and cuddly to turgid with unspoken words and potential recriminations. It's cooler than the Arctic. Fortunately, our uncomfortable car journey does not last long and Taylor pulls up outside my apartment.

I scramble out of the car quickly, not waiting for anyone to open the door. I hear Edward mutter to Taylor.

"I think you'd better wait here…"

And then I can feel him standing close behind me as I struggle to find the keys in my purse, facing the front door.

"Isabella," he says softly, calmly, like I'm some cornered wild animal.

I sigh deeply and turn to face him. I am so mad at him at this moment. My anger is a palpable, dark entity threatening to choke me.

"Firstly, I haven't fucked you for a while – a long while, it feels. Secondly, I wanted to branch into publishing. Of the four companies in Seattle, SIP is the most profitable, but it's on the cusp and it's going to stagnate. It needs to branch out."

I stare mulishly at him. His green eyes are so intense, threatening even, but sexy as hell. I could get lost in their emerald depths.

"So you're my boss now," I snap.

"Technically I'm your boss's boss's boss's boss."

"And technically, it's gross moral turpitude, the fact that I am fucking my boss's boss's boss's boss."

"At the moment you're arguing with him." Edward glowers at me.

"That's because he's such an ass," I hiss at him.

Edward steps back in stunned surprise. *Oh shit, have I gone too far?*

"An ass?" he murmurs as his expression changes… to one of amusement.

Goddammit. I am mad at you, do not make me laugh!

"Yes." I struggle to maintain my look of moral outrage.

"An ass?" Edward says again. This time his lips twitch with a smile.

"Don't make me laugh when I am mad at you!" I growl at him.

And he smiles a dazzling, full-toothed, all-American-boy smile and I can't help it. I am grinning and laughing, too. How could I not be affected by the joy I see in his smile?

"Just because I have a stupid damn grin on my face doesn't mean I am not mad as hell at you," I mutter breathlessly, trying to suppress my high-school-cheerleader giggles. I was never cheerleader, the bitter thought crosses my mind. He leans in, and I think he's going to kiss me, but he doesn't. He nuzzles my hair and inhales deeply.

"As ever Miss Swan, you are unexpected."

He leans back and gazes at me, his eyes dancing with humor.

"So are you going to invite me in or am I to be sent packing for exercising my democratic right as an American citizen, entrepreneur, and consumer, to purchase whatever I damn well please?"

"Have you spoken to Dr. Banner about this?"

He laughs. "Are you going to let me in or not, Isabella?"

I try for a grudging look – biting my lip helps – but I am smiling as I open the door. Edward turns and waves to Taylor, and the Mercedes pulls away.

It's odd having Edward Cullen in the apartment. It just feels too small for him. I am still mad at him. His stalking knows no bounds, and it dawns on me that's how he knew about the email being monitored at SIP. He probably knows more about SIP than I do. The thought is very unsavory. *What can I do?* Why does he have this need to keep me safe? I am a grown-up, sort of, for heaven's sake. What can I do to reassure him? I gaze at his

beautiful face as he wanders the room like a caged predator. Seeing him here, in my space, when I thought we were over… it's heartwarming. More than heartwarming. I love him, and my heart swells and fills, with a nervous, heady, elation. He glances around, assessing his surroundings.

"Nice place," he says.

"Rose's parents bought it for her."

He nods distractedly, and his bold green eyes come to rest on mine, staring at me.

"Err… would you like a drink?" I mutter, flushing.

"No thank you, Isabella," he says softly and his eyes darken.

Oh crap. *Why am I so nervous?*

"What would you like to do, Isabella?" he asks softly as he walks towards me, all feral and hot. Holy shit. "I know what I want to do," he adds in a low voice.

I back up until the concrete kitchen island is at my back.

"I'm still mad at you."

"I know." He smiles a lopsided apologetic smile and I melt.

"Would you like something to eat?" I stutter.

He nods slowly. "Yes. You," he murmurs. Everything south of my waistline clenches. I am seduced by his voice alone, but that look, that hungry, I-want-you-now look… Jeez.

He's standing in front of me, not quite touching, staring down at me, and I can feel his heat. *Oh my*. I am stiflingly hot, flustered, my legs are jello, muscles tightening, deep, desire coursing through me.

"Have you eaten today?" he murmurs.

"I… had a sandwich at lunch."

He narrows his eyes at me.

"You need to eat."

"I'm really not hungry right now, err… for food."

He smirks at me. “What are you hungry for, Miss Swan?”

“I think you know, Mr. Cullen.”

He leans down and again I think he’s going to kiss me, but he doesn’t. He whispers softly in my ear.

“Do you want me to kiss you, Isabella?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

“Where?”

“Everywhere.”

“You’re going to have to be a bit more specific than that. I told you I am not going to touch you until you beg me to, and tell me what to do.” My inner goddess is writhing on her chaise longue. I am lost. He’s not playing fair.

“Please…” I whisper.

“Please what?”

“Touch me.”

“Where, baby?”

He is so tantalizingly close, his scent intoxicating. I reach up and he steps back.

“No, no…” he chides.

“What?” Holy fuck, no. *Come back.*

“No.” He shakes his head at me.

“Not at all?” I can’t keep the longing out of my voice.

He looks at me uncertainly and I feel emboldened by his temerity. I step towards him and he steps back, holding up his hands, but smiling.

“Look, Bella...” And it’s a warning. He runs his hand through his hair.

“Sometimes you don’t mind," I say plaintively. "Perhaps I should find a marker and we could map out the no-go areas…”

He raises an eyebrow at me.

“That’s an idea. Where’s your bedroom?”

I nod in the direction.

“Have you been taking your pill?”

Oh shit. His face falls at my expression.

“No,” I squeak.

He presses his lips together in a hard line.

“Well, part of me is glad, not sure which part,” he says dryly. “Come, let’s go and have something to eat.”

Oh no!

“What? I thought we were going to bed. I want to go to bed with you.”

“I know, baby. You have the same effect on me that I have on you, Isabella.” He smiles, and darting towards me, he suddenly grabs my wrists and pulls me into his arms, so that I can feel his body pressed against mine.

“You need to eat and so do I,” he murmurs, burning green eyes gazing down at me. “Besides, anticipation is the key to seduction, and I’m really into delayed gratification.”

Huh, since when?

“I’m seduced and I want my gratification now. I’ll beg… please.” Jeez, I sound whiney. My inner goddess is beside herself.

He smiles at me tenderly. “Eat. I can feel how slender you are.” He kisses my forehead and releases me.

This is a game, part of some evil plan. I scowl at him.

“I’m still mad that you bought SIP, and now I am mad at you because you’re making me wait.” I pout at him.

“You are one angry little madam aren’t you? You’ll feel better after a good meal.”

“I know what I’ll feel better after…”

“Isabella Swan, I’m shocked.” His tone is gently mocking.

“Stop teasing me. You don’t fight fair.”

He stifles his grin by biting his lower lip. He looks simply adorable, playful Edward toying with my libido. If only my seduction skills were better, I’d know what to do, but not being able to touch him does hamper me. My inner goddess narrows her eyes and looks thoughtful. We need to work on this. As Edward and I gaze at each other, me hot, bothered, and yearning… him relaxed and amused, at my expense, I realize I have no food in the apartment.

“Erm… I could cook something, except we’ll have to go shopping.”

“Shopping?”

“For groceries.”

“You have no food here?” His expression hardens.

I shake my head. Oh shit, he looks quite angry.

“Let’s go shopping then,” he says sternly as he turns on his heel and heads for the door, opening it wide for me.

“When was the last time you were in a supermarket?”

Edward looks out of place, but he follows me dutifully holding a shopping basket.

“I can’t remember.”

“Does Mrs. Cope do all the shopping?”

“I think Taylor helps her. I’m not sure.”

“Are you happy with a stir-fry? It’s quick.”

“Stir-fry sounds good.” Edward grins, no doubt figuring out my ulterior motive for a speedy repast.

“Have they worked for you long?”

"Taylor, four years, I think. Mrs. Cope about the same. Why didn't you have any food in the apartment?"

"You know why," I murmur, flushing.

"It was you who left me," he mutters disapprovingly.

"I know," I reply in a small voice, not wanting that reminder.

We reach the checkout and silently stand in line. If I hadn't left, would he have offered the vanilla alternative I wonder idly.

"Do you have anything to drink?" He pulls me back to the present.

"Beer, I think."

"I'll get some wine."

Oh dear. Not sure what sort of wine they'll have in Ernie's Supermarket. There's a liquor store next door. Edward remerges empty handed, scowling, with a look of disgust.

"There's a good liquor store next door," I say quickly.

"I'll see what they have."

Oh, maybe we should just go to his place. We wouldn't have all this hassle. I watch as he strolls purposefully and with easy grace out of the door. Two women coming in stop and stare. Oh yes, eye my Fifty shades, I think despondently. I so want the memory of him in my bed, but he's playing hard to get. Maybe I should, too. My inner goddess nods frantically in agreement. *Hmmm.* And as I stand in line, we come up with a plan.

Edward carries the grocery bags into the apartment. He looks so… odd. Not his usual CEO demeanor at all.

"You look very… domestic."

"No one has ever accused me of that before," he says dryly. He places the bags on the kitchen island. As I start unloading, he takes out a bottle of white wine and searches for a corkscrew.

"This place is still so new. I think the opener is in that drawer there." I point with my chin. This feels so… normal. Two people, getting to know each other, having a meal. Yet, it's so

strange. The fear that I'd always felt in his presence has gone. We've already done so much together. I blush just thinking about it and yet I hardly know him.

"What are you thinking about?"

Edward interrupts my reverie as he shrugs out of his pinstripe jacket and places it on the couch.

"How little I know you, really."

He gazes at me and his eyes soften.

"You know me better than anyone," he murmurs.

"I don't think that's true." Mrs. Robinson comes unbidden and very unwelcome into my mind.

"It is, Isabella. I am a very, very private person."

He hands me a glass of white wine.

"Cheers," he says.

"Cheers," I respond and take a sip.

He puts the bottle in the fridge.

"Can I help you with that?" he asks.

What?

"No, it's fine… sit."

"I'd like to help."

I gaze at him and meet his sincere expression.

"You can chop the vegetables."

"I don't cook," he says, regarding the knife I give him with suspicion.

"I imagine you don't need to."

I place a chopping board and some red peppers in front of him. He stares down at them in confusion.

"You've never chopped a vegetable?"

"No."

I smirk at him.

"Are you smirking at me?"

"Well, it appears this is something that I can do and you can't. Let's face it, Edward, I think this is a first. Here, I'll show you."

I brush up against him and he steps back. My inner goddess sits up and takes notice.

"Like this." I slice the red pepper, careful to remove the seeds.

"Looks simple enough."

"You shouldn't have any trouble with it," I mutter ironically.

He gazes at me impassively for a moment and then sets about his task as I continue to prepare the diced chicken. He starts to slice carefully, slowly. Oh my, we'll be here all day.

I wash my hands and hunt for the wok, the oil, and the other ingredients I need, repeatedly brushing against him. My hip, my arm, my back, my hands… Small, seemingly innocent touches. He stills each time I do.

"I know what you're doing, Isabella," he murmurs darkly, still preparing the first pepper.

"I think it's called cooking," I say disingenuously.

Grabbing another knife, I join him at the chopping board peeling and slicing garlic, shallots, and green beans, continuingly bumping against him.

"You're quite good at this," he mutters as he starts on his second red pepper.

"Chopping?" I bat my eyelashes at him. "Years of practice."

I brush against him again, this time with my behind. He stills once more.

"If you do that again, Isabella, I am going to take you on the kitchen floor."

Oh… wow.

"You'll have to beg me first."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Maybe."

He puts down his knife and saunters slowly over to me, green eyes burning. Leaning past me, he switches the gas off. The oil in the wok quiets almost immediately.

"I think we'll eat later," he says quietly. "Put the chicken in the fridge."

This is not a sentence I had ever expected to hear from Edward Cullen, and only he can make it sound really, really hot. I pick up the bowl of diced chicken, rather shakily place a plate on top of it, and stow it in the fridge. When I turn back, he's beside me.

"So you're going to beg?" I whisper bravely, gazing into his darken eyes.

"No, Isabella." He shakes his head. "No begging." His voice is soft, seductive.

And we stand staring at each other, drinking each other in, the atmosphere charging between us, almost crackling, neither saying anything… just… looking. I bite my lip as desire for this beautiful man seizes me with a vengeance, igniting my blood, shallowing my breath, pooling below my waist, and I see my reactions reflected in his stance, in his eyes. In a beat, he grabs me by my hips and pulls me to him as my hands reach for his hair and his mouth claims me. He pushes me against the fridge and I hear the vague protesting rattle of bottles and jars from within as his tongue finds mine. I moan into his mouth and one of his hands moves into my hair, pulling my head back, as we kiss, savagely.

"What do you want, Isabella?" he breathes.

"You," I gasp.

"Where?"

"Bed."

He breaks free from me, scoops me into his arms, and carries me quickly and seemingly without any strain into my bedroom. Setting me on my feet beside my bed, he leans down and switches on my sidelight. He glances quickly around the room and hastily closes the pale cream curtains.

"Now what?" he says softly.

“Make love to me.”

“How?”

Jeez.

“You have got to tell me, baby.”

Holy crap.

“Undress me.”

He smiles and hooks his index finger into my blouse, pulling me towards him.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, and without taking his blazing eyes off mine, slowly starts to unbutton my blouse.

Tentatively, I put my hands on his arms to steady myself. He doesn’t complain. When he’s finished with the buttons, he pulls my blouse from my shoulders and I let go of him, letting it fall to the floor. He reaches down to the waistband of my jeans, pops the button, and pulls down the zipper.

“Tell me what you want, Isabella.”

His green eyes smolder at me and his mouth is open slightly as he takes quick shallow breaths.

“Kiss me from here to here,” I whisper, trailing my finger from the base of my ear, down my throat. He smoothes my hair out of the line of fire and bends to kiss a long, languorous trail of sweet soft kisses along the path my finger took, and then back again.

Oh... my...

“My jeans, and panties,” I murmur, and I can feel his smile against my throat before he drops to his knees in front of me. Oh, I feel so powerful. Hooking his thumbs into my jeans, he gently pulls them and my panties down my legs. I step out of my pumps and my clothes; now I’m wearing only my bra. He stops and looks up at me expectantly, but he doesn’t get up.

“What now, Isabella?”

“Kiss me,” I breathe.

“Where?”

"You know where."

"Where?"

Oh, he's taking no prisoners. Quickly and embarrassed, I point at the apex of my thighs and he grins, wickedly. I close my eyes, mortified, and at the same time, beyond aroused.

"Oh, with pleasure," he chuckles.

And he kisses me. His tongue, his joy-inspiring expert tongue. Oh my. I groan and fist my hands into his hair. He doesn't stop, his tongue circling my clitoris, driving me insane. Ahhh, it's only been how long? Oh…

"Edward, please," I beg. I don't want to come standing, I don't have the strength.

"Please what, Isabella?"

"Make love to me."

"I am," he breathes, gently blowing against me.

"No, I want you inside me."

"Are you sure?"

"Please…"

He doesn't stop his sweet, exquisite torture. I moan loudly.

"Edward… Please."

He stands and gazes down at me, and his mouth glistens with the evidence of my arousal. Holy crow.

"Well?" he asks.

"Well what?" I pant, staring up at him in frantic need.

"I'm still dressed."

I gape at him in confusion.

Oh, undress him. Yes, I can do this. I reach for his shirt and he steps back.

"Oh no," he admonishes. Shit, he means his jeans.

Oh, and this gives me an idea. My inner goddess cheers loudly to the rafters and I drop to my knees in front of him. Rather clumsily, with shaking fingers, I undo his waistband and fly, then yank down his jeans and boxers and he springs free. Wow. I peek up at him briefly and he's gazing at me with… what, trepidation? Awe? As he steps out of his jeans and pulls off his socks, I take hold of him in my hand and squeeze tightly, and push my hand back, like he's shown me before. He groans and tenses, and I hear his breath exhale through clenched teeth, and very tentatively, I put him in my mouth and suck… hard.

Oh, he tastes so good.

"Ahh… Bella… whoa, gently."

He cups my head tenderly and I push him deeper into my mouth, pressing my lips together as tightly as I can, sheathing my teeth and sucking hard.

"Fuck," he hisses.

Oh, that's a good, inspiring, sexy sound and I do again and again, continuously. And I swirl my tongue around the end. Hmmm, I feel like Aphro-fucking-dite.

"Bella, that's enough. No more, please."

I do it again. Beg Cullen, beg… And again.

"Bella, you've made your point," he grunts through gritted teeth. "I do not want to come in your mouth."

I do it once more and he bends down, grasps me by my shoulders, hauls me to my feet, and tosses me on the bed. He reaches down into the pocket of his jeans and like a good boy scout produces a foil packet. He's panting, like me.

"Take your bra off," he orders.

And I sit up and do as I'm told.

"Lie down. I want to look at you."

I lie down, gazing up at him as he slowly rolls the condom down his length. Oh my. I want him so badly. He stares down at me and licks his lips.

"You are a fine sight, Isabella Swan."

He bends down over the bed, and slowly crawls up and over me, kissing me as he goes. He kisses each of my breasts and sucks my nipples in turn. I groan and writhe beneath him, and he doesn't stop. No, I want you…

"Edward, please…"

"Please what?" he murmurs between my breasts.

"I want you inside me."

"Do you now?"

"Yes… please."

He gazes up at me, pushes my legs apart with his, and moves so that he's hovering above me. Wery slowly, not taking his eyes off mine, he sinks into me. I close my eyes, relishing the fullness, the delicious feeling of his possession, instinctively tilting my pelvis up to meet him. To join with him. I groan loudly. He eases back and very slowly he fills me again, and my fingers find their way into his silken copper-colored hair. He oh-so-slowly moves in and out again. No…

"Faster, Edward, faster…. Please."

He gazes down at me in triumph, kisses me hard, and really starts to move. Holy cow, it is punishing, relentless… Oh fuck. I know it will not be long. A pounding rhythm. I start to quicken, my legs tensing beneath him.

"Come on baby," he gasps. "Give it to me."

His words are my undoing, and I explode, magnificently, mind-numbingly, around him into a million pieces and he follows, calling out my name.

"Bella! Oh fuck, Bella!"

And he collapses on top of me, his head buried in my neck.

Chapter 58

As sanity returns I open my eyes and gaze up into the face of the man I love. Edward's expression is soft, tender. He strokes his nose against mine, bearing his weight on his elbows, his hands holding mine by the side of my head. Sadly, I suspect that's so I don't touch him. He plants a gentle kiss on my lips as he eases himself out of me.

"I've missed this," he breathes.

"Me too," I whisper.

He takes hold of my chin and kisses me hard, a passionate, beseeching kiss. Asking for… what? It leaves me breathless.

"Don't leave me again," he implores, looking deep into my eyes, his face serious.

"Okay," I whisper and smile softly at him. His answering smile is dazzling; relief, elation and boyish delight combined into one enchanting look that would melt the coldest of hearts.

"Thank you for the iPod." I bite my lip, gauging his reaction.

His dazzling smile remains, thank heavens.

"You are most welcome, Isabella."

"What's you're favorite song on there?"

He looks thoughtful for a moment.

"Now that would be telling." He grins. "Come cook me some food, wench. I'm famished," he adds, sitting up suddenly, dragging me with him.

"Wench?" I giggle.

"Wench. Food, now, please."

"Well, since you ask so nicely, sire, I'll get right on to it."

As I clamber out of bed I dislodge my pillow, revealing the deflated helicopter balloon underneath. Edward reaches for it and gazes up at me, puzzled.

"That's my balloon," I say proprietarily as I reach for my dressing gown and wrap it around myself. Oh jeez, why did he have to find that?

“In your bed?” he murmurs.

“Yes.” I flush. “It’s been keeping me company.”

“Lucky Echo Charlie,” he says, raising his eyebrows, as if surprised that I still have it. Yes, I am sentimental, Cullen… because I love you.

“My balloon,” I say again and turn on my heel and head out to the kitchen, leaving him grinning from ear to ear.

Edward and I sit on Rose’s Persian rug eating stir-fry chicken and noodles from white china bowls with chopsticks, and sipping chilled white Pinot Grigio. Edward leans against the couch, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He’s wearing his jeans and his shirt… and that’s all. The Buena Vista Social Club croon softly in the background from Edward's iPod.

“This is good,” he says appreciatively as he tucks into his food.

I sit cross-legged beside him, eating greedily, beyond hungry, and admire his naked feet.

“I usually do all the cooking. Rose isn’t a great cook.”

“Did you learn from your mother?”

“No,” I scoff. Oh, how little he knows. My mother is a liability in the kitchen. How Phil copes with her… err… creations is beyond me, and my father lives on takeout.

“Both my parents are hopeless in the kitchen. I’ve been cooking a long time,” I murmur dryly.

Edward gazes down at me.

“Sounds like you looked after them,” he says softly.

“I suppose.” I shrug.

“You’re used to taking care of people.”

The edge in his voice attracts my attention and I glance up at him.

“What is it?” I ask, startled by his wary expression.

“I want to take care of you.” His green eyes glow with some unnamed emotion.

Holy crap. My heart rate spikes.

“I’ve noticed,” I breathe. “You just go about it in a very strange way.”

His brow creases.

“Only way I know how,” he says quietly.

“I’m still mad at you for buying SIP.”

He smiles. “I know. You being mad, baby, wouldn’t stop me.” He shakes his head.

“What am I going to say to my work colleagues. To err… James?”

He narrows his eyes.

“That fucker better watch himself.”

“Edward!” I admonish. “He’s my boss.”

Edward's mouth presses into a hard line. He looks like a recalcitrant schoolboy.

“Don’t tell them.”

“Don’t tell them what?”

“That I own it. The deal was signed yesterday. The news is embargoed for four weeks, while the SIP management make some changes.”

“Oh. Will I be out of a job?” I ask, alarmed.

“I sincerely doubt it,” Edward says wryly, trying to stifle his smile.

I scowl at him.

“If I leave and find another job, will you buy that company, too?”

“You’re not thinking of leaving, are you?” His expression changes to one of mild panic.

“Possibly. I’m not sure you’ve given me a great deal of choice.”

“Yes, I will buy that company, too.” His voice is adamant.

I scowl at him again. I am in a no-win situation here.

“Don’t you think you’re being a tad overprotective?”

“Yes. I am fully aware of how this looks.”

"Paging Dr. Banner," I murmur.

He puts down his empty bowl and gazes at me impassively. I sigh. I don’t want to fight. Standing up, I reach for his bowl.

“Would you like dessert?”

“Oh, now you’re talking,” he says, giving me a lascivious grin.

“Not *me*...” Why not me? My inner goddess wakes from her doze and sits upright, all ears. “We have ice cream. Vanilla,” I snicker.

“Really?” Edward’s grin gets bigger. “I think we could do something with that.”

What? I stare at him dumbfounded as he gracefully gets to his feet.

“Can I stay?” he asks.

Whoa … Change of direction.

“What do you mean?”

“The night.”

“I rather assumed that you were.” I flush.

“Good. Where’s the ice cream?”

“In the oven.” I smile sweetly at him.

He cocks his head to one side, sighs, and shakes his head at me.

“Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, Miss Swan.” His eyes glitter.

Oh shit. What’s he planning?

“I could still take you across my knee.”

I place the bowls in the sink.

“Do you have those silver ball things?”

He pats his hands down his chest, belly, and the pockets of his jeans.

“Funnily enough, I don’t carry a spare set around with me. Not much call for them in the office.”

“I am very glad to hear it, Mr. Cullen… and I thought you said that sarcasm was the lowest form of wit.”

“Well Isabella, my new motto is if you can’t beat them, join them.”

I gape at him. I can’t believe he’s just said that. He looks sickeningly pleased with himself as he grins at me. Turning, he opens the freezer and takes out the container of Ben & Jerry’s finest vanilla.

“This will do just fine.” He looks up at me, eyes dark. “Ben & Jerry’s & Bella,” he says each word slowly, enunciating each syllable clearly.

Oh fucking my. I think my lower jaw is on the floor. He opens the cutlery drawer and grabs a spoon. He glances up at me, eyes hooded, and I can see his tongue skim his top teeth. Oh, that tongue. I feel winded. Desire, dark, sleek and wanton, runs hot through my veins. We're going to have fun... with food.

“I hope you’re warm,” he whispers. “I’m going to cool you down with this. Come.” He holds out his hand and I place mine in his.

In my bedroom, he places the ice-cream on my bedside table, pulls the duvet off the bed and removes both the pillows, placing them all in a pile on the floor.

“You have a change of sheets don’t you?”

I nod, watching him, fascinated. He holds up Echo Charlie.

“Don’t mess with my balloon,” I warn.

His lips quirk up in a half-smile.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, baby, but I do want to mess with you and these sheets.”

My body practically convulses.

“I want to tie you up.”

Oh…

“Okay,” I whisper.

“Just your hands. To the bed. I need you still.”

“Okay,” I whisper again, incapable of anything more.

He strolls over to me, not taking his eyes off mine.

“We’ll use this.”

He takes hold of my dressing gown sash and with delicious, teasing slowness, releases the bow and gently pulls it free of the garment. My robe falls open, revealing me, and I stand paralyzed under his heated gaze. After a moment, he pushes the robe off my shoulders. It falls and pools at my feet so that I’m standing naked before him. He strokes my face with the backs of his knuckles, and I feel his touch resonate in the depths of my groin. Bending, he kisses my lips briefly.

“Lie on the bed, face up,” he murmurs gently, his eyes darkening, burning into mine. I do as I’m told. My room is shrouded in darkness except from the soft insipid light from my sidelight. Normally, I hate energy saving bulbs, they are so dim, but being naked here, with Edward, I'm grateful for the muted light. He stands by the bed gazing down at me.

“I could look at you all day, Isabella,” he murmurs, and with that, clambers on to the bed and sits astride me.

“Arms above your head,” he commands quietly.

I lift my arms. He fastens the end of my dressing gown sash round my left wrist and threads the end through the metal bars at the head of my bed. He pulls it tight so my left arm is flexed above me. Then, taking my right wrist, he fastens the other end of the sash tightly to it. I am secured, and staring at him. He visibly relaxes. He likes me tethered. I can’t touch him this way. It occurs to me that none of his subs would have touched him either, and what’s more, they would never have the opportunity to. He would have always been in control, and at a distance.

He climbs off me and bends swiftly to offer me a quick peck on the lips. Then he stands and lifts his shirt off, over his head. He undoes his jeans and drops them to the floor. He is gloriously naked. Oh my. My inner goddess is doing a triple axle dismount off the

asymmetric bars, and abruptly my mouth is dry. He really is beyond beautiful, a physique drawn on classical lines, broad muscular shoulders, narrow hips… the inverted triangle. He obviously works out. I could look at *him* all day. He moves to the end of the bed and grasping my ankles, pulls me swiftly and sharply down so that my arms are stretched out and unable to move.

"That's better," he mutters.

Picking up the tub of ice cream, he climbs smoothly back onto the bed to sit astride me once more. Very slowly, he peels the lid off the tub and dips the spoon in.

"Hmmm… it's still quite hard," he says, scooping out a spoonful of the vanilla and popping it into his mouth. "Delicious," he murmurs, licking his lips. "Amazing how good plain old vanilla can taste." He gazes down at me and smirks. "Want some?" he teases.

He looks so freaking hot, young, carefree…. Sitting on me eating from a tub of ice cream, eyes bright, face luminous. Oh my. What the hell is he going to do to me? As if I can't tell. I nod, shyly.

He scoops out another spoonful and offers me the spoon, so I open my mouth, then he quickly pops it in his mouth again.

"This is too good to share," he says, smiling wickedly.

"Hey," I start in protest.

"Why Miss Swan, do you like your vanilla?"

"Yes," I say more forcefully than I mean and I try in vain to buck him off.

He laughs. "Getting feisty, are we? I wouldn't do that if I were you, Miss Swan."

"Ice cream," I plead.

"As you've pleased me so much today…" He relents and offers me another spoonful. This time he lets me eat it. I want to giggle. He's really enjoying himself. He scoops another spoonful and feeds me some more, and again… Okay, enough…

"Hmmm, well this is one way to ensure you eat – force-feed you. I could get used to this."

Taking another spoonful, he offers me more. This time I keep my mouth shut and shake my head. He lets it slowly melt on the spoon so that the melted ice cream drips, on to my throat, on to my chest, then he dips down, and very slowly licks it off, and my body lights up with longing.

"Hmmm, tastes even better off you, Miss Swan," he murmurs. I pull against my restraints and the bed creaks ominously, but I don't care – I'm burning with desire, it's consuming me. He takes another spoonful and lets the ice cream drop on to my breasts, then with the back of the spoon, he spreads it over each breast and nipple. Ooh, *it's cold.* I feel each nipple harden beneath the cool of the vanilla.

"Cold?" Edward asks softly, and bends to lick and suckle all the ice cream off me once more, his hot mouth against the cool of the ice. Oh… my. It's torture. As it starts to melt, I can feel the ice cream running off me in rivulets on to the bed. His lips continue their slow torture, sucking hard, nuzzling softly. Oh, please. I'm panting.

"Want some?" And before I can confirm or deny his offer, his tongue is in my mouth. It's cold and skilled and tastes of Edward and vanilla. Delicious. And just as I am getting used to the sensation, he sits up again and trails a spoonful of ice cream down the center line of my body, across my stomach, into my navel, where he deposits a large dollop of ice cream. *Oh,* it's cold.

"Now, you've done this before…" Edward's eyes shine at me. "You're going to have to stay still, or there will be ice cream all over the bed." He kisses each of my breasts and sucks each of my nipples, hard, then follows the line of ice cream down my body, sucking and licking as he goes. And I try, I try to stay still, but the heady combination of cold, and his inflaming touch… My hips start moving involuntarily, gyrating to their own rhythm, caught up in his cool vanilla spell. He shifts lower down my body and starts eating the ice cream in my belly, swirling his tongue into and around my navel.

I groan loudly. It's cold, it's hot, it's tantalizing, but he doesn't stop. He trails more ice cream further down my body, into my pubic hair, on to my clitoris… Holy *cow* it's cold, and I cry out, loudly.

"Hush now," Edward says softly as his magical tongue sets to work lapping up the vanilla, and now I'm keening quietly.

"Oh… please, Edward…"

"I know, baby, I know," he breathes.

But he doesn't stop, and I can feel my body climbing. He slips one finger inside me, then another, and moves them with agonizing slowness in and out.

"Just here," he murmurs and he rhythmically strokes the front wall of my vagina, whilst he continues the exquisite, relentless licking and sucking. *Holy fucking cow.* I erupt unexpectedly into a mind-blowing orgasm that stuns all my senses, obliterating all that's happening outside of my body, as I writhe and groan. Oh my. That was so quick. I am

vaguely aware that he has stopped his ministrations and he's hovering over me, sliding on a condom and then he's inside me, hard and fast.

"Oh yes," he groans as he slams into me. He feels sticky on top of me, the residual melted ice cream spreading between us. It's a strangely distracting sensation, but one I can't dwell on for more than a few seconds as Edward suddenly pulls out of me and flips me over.

"This way," he murmurs, and abruptly is inside me once more. But he doesn't start his usual punishing rhythm straight away. He leans over me and releases my hands and then pulls me upright so I am practically sitting on him. His hands move up to my breasts and he palms them both, tugging gently on my nipples. I groan, tossing my head back against his shoulder. He nuzzles my neck, biting down, as he flexes his hips, deliciously slowly, filling me, again and again.

"Do you know how much you mean to me?" he breathes against my ear.

"No," I gasp.

I feel his smile against my neck.

"Yes, you do. I'm not going to let you go."

I groan, as he picks up speed.

"You are mine, Isabella."

"Yes, yours," I pant.

"I take care of what's mine," he hisses, and bites my ear.

I cry out.

"That's right, baby, I want to hear you." He snakes one hand across my chest to clasp my shoulder while his other hand grasps my hip and he pushes into me harder, making me cry out again, and the punishing rhythm starts. I can hear his breathing as it becomes harsher, ragged, matching mine. I can feel the familiar quickening deep in my belly. *Jeez, again!*

I am just sensation. This is what he does to me, takes my body and possesses it wholly, so that I think of nothing but him. His magic is powerful, intoxicating. I'm a butterfly caught in his net, unable and unwilling to escape. His. Totally his.

"Come on, baby," he breathes, and on cue, like the sorcerer's apprentice that I am, I let go, and we find our release together.

I am lying curled up in his arms, on sticky sheets. His front is pressed to my back, his nose in my hair.

"What I feel for you frightens me," I whisper.

He stills. "Me too, baby," he says quietly.

"What if you leave me?" The thought is horrific.

"I'm not going anywhere. I don't think I could ever have my fill of you, Isabella."

I turn and gaze at him. His expression is serious, sincere. I lean down and kiss him gently, and he smiles and reaches up to tuck my hair behind my ear.

"I've never felt the way I felt when you left, Isabella. I would move Heaven and Earth to avoid feeling like that again."

I lean down and kiss him again. I want to lighten our mood, somehow. Edward does it for me.

"Will you come with me to my father's Summer Party tomorrow? It's an annual charity thing. I said I'd go."

I smile down at him. "Of course I'll come." Oh shit. I have nothing to wear.

"What?"

"I have nothing to wear."

Edward looks momentarily uncomfortable.

"Err… Don't get mad, but… I still have all those clothes for you at home. I am sure there are a couple of dresses in there."

I purse my lips.

"I don't want to fight with you now. I need a shower."

The girl who looks like me is standing outside SIP. Hang on – she is me. I am pale and unwashed and all my clothes are too big and I am staring at her and she's wearing my clothes… happy, healthy.

"What do you have that I don't?" I ask her.

"Who are you?"

"I'm nobody. Who are you? Are you nobody too?"

"Then there's a pair of us – don't tell, they'd banish us, you know."

And she smiles. A slow, evil, grimace thats spreads across her face and it is so chilling. I start to scream.

"Jesus, Bella!" Edward is shaking me awake.

I am so disorientated. I'm at home, in the dark, in bed with Edward. I shake my head.

"Baby, are you okay? You were having a bad dream."

"Oh…"

He switches on the sidelight. It's so dim, but I can see as he gazes down at me that his face is etched with concern.

"The girl…"

"What is it? What girl?" he asks soothingly.

"There was a girl outside SIP, when I left this evening. She looked like me, but not really."

Edward stills, and as the light from the bedside lamp warms up, I can see he's gone pale.

"When was this?" he whispers, and I can hear the dismay in his voice. He sits up, staring down at me.

"When I left this afternoon. Do you know who she is?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

His mouth presses into a hard line.

“Lauren.”

Chapter 59

I swallow. Holy shit, the ex-sub. I remember Edward talking about her before we went gliding. He looks so tense. Something is going on…

"The girl who put Toxic on your iPod?"

He glances at me anxiously.

"Yes," he says softly. "Did she say anything?"

"She said, 'What do you have that I don't have?' and when I asked who she was, she said 'Nobody…'"

Edward closes his eyes as if in pain. Oh no. What's happened? What does she mean to him? My scalp prickles as adrenaline spikes through my body. Jeez, what if she means a lot to him? Perhaps he misses her? I know so little about his past … err, relationships. She must have had a contract, and she would have done what he wanted, given him what he needed. Gladly, probably. *Oh no – when I can't.* I feel vaguely nauseous.

Climbing out of bed Edward, drags on his jeans and heads into the main room. A glance at my radio alarm clock shows it's five in the morning. I clamber out of bed, putting his white shirt on, and follow him.

Holy crow, he's on the phone.

"Yes, outside SIP, yesterday afternoon," he says quietly. He turns to me as I move towards the kitchen and asks me directly, "What time exactly?"

"Err… about ten to six?" I mumble. Who on earth is he calling at this hour? What's Lauren done? He relays the information to whoever's on the line, not taking his eyes off me, his expression dark and earnest.

"Find out how… Yes… I wouldn't have said so, but then I wouldn't have thought she could do this." He shakes his head. "I don't know how that will go down… Yes, I'll talk to her… Yes, I know… Follow it up, and let me know. Just find her, Jenks – she's in trouble. Find her." He hangs up.

"Do you want some tea?" I ask. Tea… my father's answer to every crisis and the only thing he does well in the kitchen. I fill the kettle with water.

"Actually, I'd like to go back to bed." His look tells me that it's not to sleep.

“Well, I need some tea. Would you like to join me in a cup?” I want to know what’s going on. I will not be sidetracked by sex.

He runs his hand through his hair in exasperation. “Yes, please,” he says, but I can tell he’s irritated.

I put the kettle on the stove and busy myself with teacups and teapot. My anxiety level has shot to DefCon One. Is he going to tell me the problem? Or am I going to have to dig? I can feel his eyes on me, sense his uncertainty. His anger is palpable. I glance up at him and see his green eyes glow with apprehension.

“What is it?” I ask softly.

He shakes his head.

“You’re not going to tell me?”

He sighs, and closes his eyes.

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it shouldn’t concern you. I don’t want you tangled up in this.”

“It shouldn’t concern me, but it does. She found me and accosted me outside my place of work. How does she know about me? How does she know where I work? I think I have a right to know what’s going on.”

He runs a hand through his hair again. He looks so frustrated, as if waging some internal battle.

“Please?” I ask softly.

His mouth sets into a hard line and he rolls his eyes at me.

“Okay,” he says, resigned. “I have no idea how she found you. Maybe the photograph of us in Portland, I don’t know.” He sighs again, and I can tell his frustration is directed at himself. I wait patiently, pouring boiling water into the teapot as he paces to and fro. After a beat, he continues.

“While I was with you in Florida, Lauren turned up at my apartment completely unannounced, and… made a scene in front of Gail.”

"Gail?"

"Mrs. Cope."

"What do you mean, made a scene?"

He glares at me, appraising.

"Tell me. You're keeping something back." My tone is more forceful than I feel.

He blinks at me, surprised.

"Bella, I –" he stops.

"Please?"

"She made a haphazard attempt at opening a vein."

"Oh no!"

The bandage on her wrist…

"Gail got her to hospital. But Lauren discharged herself before I could get there."

Holy crow. What does this mean? Suicidal… why?

"The psyche who saw her called it a typical cry for help. He didn't believe her to be truly at risk. One step from suicidal ideation, he called it. But I'm not convinced. I've been trying to track her down since then, to get her some help."

"Did she say anything to Mrs. Cope?"

He gazes at me. He looks really uncomfortable.

"Not much," he says eventually, but I know he's not telling me everything. I distract myself with pouring tea into teacups. So, Lauren wants back into Edward's life, and chooses a suicide attempt to attract his attention? Whoa… scary. But effective. Edward left Florida to be at her side, then she disappears before he gets there? How odd.

"You can't find her? What about her family?"

"They don't know where she is. Neither does her husband."

Oh.

"Husband?"

"Yes," he says distractedly, "she got married about two years ago."

What?

"So she was with you while she was married?" Jeez, he really has no boundaries…

"No! Good God, no. She was with me about three years ago, then she left, and married this guy shortly afterward."

Oh…

"So why is she trying to get your attention now?"

He shakes his head sadly. "I don't know. All we've managed to find out is that she ran out on her husband about four months ago."

"Let me get this straight. She hasn't been your submissive for three years?"

"About two and a half years."

"And she wanted more."

"Yes."

"But you didn't?"

"You know this."

"So she left you."

"Yes."

"So why is she coming to you now?"

"I don't know." And the tone of this voice tells me that he at least has a theory.

"But you suspect…"

His eyes narrow perceptibly with anger.

"I suspect it has something to do with you."

Oh… Me? What would she want with me? *'What do you have that I don't?'* I stare at Fifty, magnificently naked from the waist up. I have him. He's mine. That's what I have, and yet she looked… like me. Same dark hair, dark eyes, pale skin. I frown at the thought. Yes, what do I have that she doesn't?

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday?" he asks softly.

"I forgot about her." I shrug apologetically. "You know, drinks after work, at the end of my first week. You turning up… your… err – testosterone rush with James, and then, when we were here, it slipped my mind. You have a habit of making me… forget things."

"Testosterone rush?" His lips twitch.

"Yes. The pissing contest."

"I'll show you a testosterone rush."

"Wouldn't you rather have a cup of tea?"

"No, Isabella, I wouldn't."

His eyes burn into me, scorching with his 'I-want-you-and-I-want-you-now' look. Fuck, it's so hot.

"Forget about her. Come," he says and holds out his hand.

My inner goddess does three back flips over the gym floor as I grasp his hand.

I wake, too warm. I am wrapped around a naked Edward Cullen, and though he's fast asleep, he's holding me to him. Oh… my. Soft morning light filters through the curtains. My head is on his chest, my leg tangled with his, my arm across his stomach. I raise my head slightly, scared that I might wake him. He looks so young, so relaxed in sleep. So utterly beautiful. I can't quite believe this Adonis is mine, all mine. Hmm… Reaching up, I tentatively stroke his chest, running my fingertips through the smattering of hair, and he doesn't stir. Holy cow. I can't quite believe it. He's really mine, for a few more precious moments. I lean over and tenderly kiss one of his scars. He moans softly, but doesn't wake, and I smile. I kiss another, and his eyes open.

"Hi." I grin at him, guiltily.

"Hi," he answers warily. "What are you doing?"

“Looking at you.” I run my fingers down his happy trail. His hand quickly captures mine and he narrows his eyes at me, then smiles a dazzling, Edward-at-ease smile, and I relax. My secret touching stays secret. Oh, why won’t you let me touch you? Suddenly he moves on top of me, pressing me into the mattress, his hands on mine loosely, warning me. He strokes my nose with his.

“I think you’re up to no good, Miss Swan,” he accuses, but his smile remains.

“I like to be up to no good near you.”

“Do you?" he murmurs, and kisses me lightly on the lips. “Sex or breakfast?” he asks, his eyes dark but full of humor. I can feel his erection against me. I tilt my pelvis up to meet him.

“Good choice,” he mutters against my throat, as he trails kisses down to my breast.

I stand at my chest of drawers, staring at my mirror, trying to coax my hair into some semblance of a style. Really, it’s just too long. I’m in jeans and a t-shirt and Edward, freshly showered, is dressing behind me. I gaze at his body hungrily.

“How often do you work out?” I ask.

“Every weekday,” he says, buttoning his fly.

“What do you do?”

“Run, weights, kickbox. Usual stuff.”

“Kickbox?”

“Yes, I have a personal trainer, an ex-Olympic contender who teaches me. His name is Laurent. He’s very good. You’d like him.”

I turn to gaze at him as he starts to button up his white shirt.

“What do you mean I’d like him?”

“You’d like him as a trainer.”

“Why would I need a personal trainer? I have you to keep me fit.” I smirk at him. He saunters over and wraps his arms around me, his smoldering green eyes meeting mine in the mirror.

“But I want you fit, baby, for what I have in mind. I’ll need you to keep up.”

I flush as memories of the playroom flood my mind. Yes, exhausting. is he going to let me back in there? Do I want to go back in? *Of course you do!* My inner goddess screams at me from behind her chaise longue. I stare into his bottomless, mesmerizing green eyes.

“You know you want to,” he mouths at me.

I flush, and the undesirable thought that Lauren could probably keep up slithers, invidious and unwelcome, through my brain. I press my lips together and Edward frowns at me.

“What?” he asks, concerned.

“Nothing.” I shake my head at him. “Okay, I’ll meet Laurent.”

“You will?” Edward’s face lights up in astounded disbelief. His expression makes me smile. It’s like he’s won the lottery, though Edward's probably never even bought a ticket. He has no need.

“Yes, jeez, if it makes you that happy,” I scoff.

He tightens his arms around me and kisses my cheek.

“You have no idea,” he breathes. “So, what would you like to do today?” He nuzzles me, sending shivers all the way through my body.

“Well, I’d like to get my hair cut and err…I need to bank a check and buy a car.”

“Ah,” he says knowingly, and bites his lip. Taking one hand off me, he reaches into his jeans pocket. He gazes at me uncertainly in the mirror, and holds up the key to the Volvo.

“It’s here,” he says quietly.

“What do you mean it’s here?” Boy, I sound angry. Jeez, I am angry. My subconscious glares at him. How dare he!

“Taylor brought it back yesterday.”

I open my mouth and then close it, and repeat the process twice, but I have been rendered speechless. He’s giving me back the car. Crap. Why didn’t I foresee this? Well, two can play at that game.

I fish in the back pocket of my jeans and pull out the envelope with his check.

“Here. This is yours.”

Edward looks at me quizzically, then recognizing the envelope, raises both his hands and steps away from me.

“Oh no. That’s your money.”

“No it isn’t. I’d like to buy the car from you.”

His expression changes completely. Fury, yes, fury sweeps across his face.

“No, Isabella. Your money, your car,” he snaps at me.

“No, Edward. My money, your car. I’ll buy it from you.”

“I gave you that car for your graduation present.”

“If you’d given me a… pen, that would be a suitable graduation present. You gave me a Volvo.”

“Do you really want to argue about this?”

“No.”

“Good, here are the keys.” He puts them on the chest of drawers.

“That’s not what I meant!”

“End of discussion, Isabella. Don’t push me.”

I scowl at him, and then inspiration hits me. Taking the envelope in my hands, I rip it in two, and then two again, and drop the contents into my waste bin. Oh, that feels good.

Edward gazes at me impassively, but I know I’ve just lit the blue touch paper, and should stand well back. He strokes his chin.

“You are as ever, challenging, Miss Swan,” he says dryly. He turns on his heel and stalks into the other room. That is not the reaction I expected. I was anticipating full scale Armageddon. I stare at myself in the mirror and shrug, deciding on a ponytail. But my curiosity is piqued. What is Fifty doing? I follow him into the room, to find him on the phone.

“Yes, twenty-four thousand dollars. Directly.”

He glances up at me, still impassive.

"Good… Monday? Excellent… No that's all, Angela."

He snaps the phone shut.

"Deposited in your bank, Monday. Don't play games with me." He's boiling mad, but I don't care.

"Twenty-four thousand dollars!" I'm almost screaming. "And how do you know my account number?"

My ire takes Edward by surprise.

"I know everything about you, Isabella," he says quietly.

"There's no way my truck was worth twenty-four thousand dollars."

"I would agree with you, but it's about knowing your market, whether you're buying or selling. Some lunatic out there wanted that deathtrap, and was willing to pay that amount of money. Apparently it's a classic. Ask Taylor if you don't believe me," he snaps.

I glower at him and he glowers back, two angry, stubborn fools gazing at each other.

And I feel it, the pull, the electricity between us, tangible, drawing us together. Suddenly, he grabs me and pushes me up against the door, his mouth on mine, claiming me hungrily. One hand on my behind pressing me to his groin, and the other in the nape of my hair, tugging my head back. My fingers are in his hair, twisting hard, holding him to me. He grinds his body into mine, imprisoning me, his breathing ragged. I can feel him, he wants me, and I'm heady and reeling as I acknowledge his need for me.

"Why? Why do you defy me?" he mumbles between his heated kisses.

My blood sings in my veins. Will he always have this effect on me? And I on him?

"Because I can," I breathe back.

And I feel, rather than see, his smile against my neck, and he presses his forehead to mine.

"Lord, I want to take you now, but I'm out of condoms. I can never get enough of you. You're a maddening, maddening woman."

"And you make me mad," I whisper. "In every way."

He shakes his head at me. “Come. Let’s go out for breakfast. And I know a place you can get your hair cut.”

“Okay,” I acquiesce, and just like that our fight is over.

“I’ll get this.” I pick up the tab for breakfast before he does.

He scowls at me.

“You have to be quick around here, Cullen.”

“You’re right, I do,” he says sourly, though I think he’s teasing.

“Don’t look so cross. I’m twenty-four thousand dollars richer than I was this morning. I can afford…” I glance at the check. “...twenty-two dollars and sixty-seven cents for breakfast.”

“Thank you,” he says grudgingly. Oh, the sulky schoolboy is back.

“Where to now?”

“You really want your hair cut?”

“Yes, look at it.”

“You look lovely to me. You always do.”

I blush, and stare down at my fingers knotted in my lap. “And there’s your father’s function this evening.”

“Remember, it’s black tie.”

Oh jeez.

“Where is it?”

“At my parents’ house. They have a huge tent. You know, the works.”

“What’s the charity?”

Edward rubs his hands down his thighs, looking uncomfortable.

“It’s a drug rehab program for parents with young kids. Called Coping Together.”

“Sounds like a good cause,” I say softly.

“Come on, let’s go.” He stands and holds out his hand. As I take it he tightens his fingers around mine. It’s strange. He’s so demonstrative in some ways, and yet so closed in others. He leads me out of the restaurant and we head down the street. It is a lovely, mild morning. The sun is shining and the air smells of coffee and freshly baked bread.

“Where are we going?”

“Surprise.”

Oh, okay… I don’t really like surprises.

We walk for two blocks and the stores become decidedly more exclusive. I haven’t yet had an opportunity to explore, but this really is just around the corner from where I live. Rose will be pleased, plenty of small boutiques to feed her fashion passion. Actually, I was going to by some floaty skirts for work…

Edward stops outside a large, slick looking beauty salon and opens the door for me. It’s called *Esclava.* The interior is all white and leather. At the stark white reception desk sits a young blonde woman in a crisp white uniform. She glances up as we enter.

“Good morning, Mr. Cullen,” she says brightly, the color rising in her cheeks as she bats her eyelashes at him.

It’s the Cullen effect, but jeez, she knows him!

“Hello Greta.”

And he knows her. What is this?

“Is this the usual, sir?” she asks politely. She’s wearing very pink lipstick.

“No,” he says quickly, with a nervous glance at me.

The usual? What does that mean? Holy fuck. Rule number 6, the damned beauty salon, waxing nonsense. Shit! This is where he brought all his subs? Maybe Lauren, too? What the hell am I supposed to make of this?

“Miss Swan will tell you what she wants.”

I glare at him. He’s introducing the Rules by stealth. I’ve agreed to the personal trainer, and now this?

"Why here?" I hiss at him.

"I own this place, and three more like it."

"You *own* it?" Well, that's unexpected.

"Yes. It's a sideline. Anyway, whatever you want, you can have it here, on the house. All sorts of massage: Swedish, shiatsu, hot stones, reflexology, seaweed baths, facials… all that stuff that women like... everything. It's done here."

"Waxing?"

He laughs. "Yes, waxing too. Everywhere," he whispers conspiratorially, enjoying my discomfort.

I blush and glance at Greta, who is looking at me expectantly.

"Err… I'd like a haircut, please."

"Certainly, Miss Swan."

Greta is all pink lipstick and bustling Germanic efficiency as she checks her computer screen.

"Franco is free in five minutes."

"Franco's fine," says Edward reassuringly to me. And I am trying to wrap my head round this. Edward Cullen CEO owns a chain of beauty salons.

I peek up at Edward, and suddenly he blanches. Something or someone has caught his eye. I turn to see where he's looking, and right at the back of the salon, a sleek platinum blonde has appeared, closing a door behind her and speaking to one of the hair stylists. Platinum Blonde is tall, tanned, and lovely, in her late thirties or forties, it's difficult to tell. She's wearing the same uniform as Greta, but in black. She looks… stunning. Her hair shines like a halo, cut in sharp bob. As she turns she catches sight of Edward, and smiles at him, a dazzling smile of warm recognition.

"Err… excuse me," Edward mumbles hurriedly.

He walks quickly through the salon, past the hair stylists all in white, past the apprentices at the sinks, and over to her, too far away for me to hear their conversation. Platinum Blonde greets him with obvious affection, kissing both his cheeks, her hands resting on his upper arms, and they talk animatedly together.

"Miss Swan?"

Greta the receptionist is trying to get my attention.

"Hang on a moment, please." I watch Edward, fascinated.

Platinum Blonde turns and looks at me, and gives me the same dazzling smile, like she knows me. I smile politely back. Edward looks upset about something. He's reasoning with her, and she's acquiescing, holding her hands up and smiling at him. He's smiling at her. Clearly they know each other well. Perhaps they've worked together for a long time? Maybe she runs the place. She has a certain look of authority.

And then it hits me like a wrecking ball, and I know, deep down in my gut. I know, on some visceral level, who it is. *It's her.* Holy fuck. Stunning, older, beautiful…

It's Mrs. Robinson.

Chapter 60

"Greta, who is Mr. Cullen talking to?" My scalp is trying to leave the building. It's prickling with apprehension, and my subconscious is screaming at me to follow it. But I sound nonchalant enough.

"Oh, that's Mrs. Lincoln. She owns the place with Mr. Cullen." Greta seems more than happy to share.

"Mrs. Lincoln?" I thought Mrs. Robinson was divorced. Perhaps she's remarried to some poor sap.

"Yes. She's not usually here, but one of our technicians is sick today so she's filling in."

"Do you know Mrs. Lincoln's first name?"

Greta looks up at me, frowning, and purses her bright pink lips, questioning my curiosity. Shit, perhaps this is a step too far.

"Irina," she says, almost reluctantly.

And I feel a strange sense of relief. My spidey sense has not let me down. *Spidey sense!* My subconscious snorts. *Paedo sense.* They are still deep in discussion. Edward is talking rapidly at Irina, and she looks worried, nodding and grimacing, then shaking her head. Reaching out, she rubs his arm soothingly, while biting her lip. Another nod, and she glances at me, and offers me a small reassuring smile. I just stare at her, stony-faced. I think I am in shock. H*ow could he bring me here?* She murmurs something to Edward. He looks my way briefly, then turns back to her and replies. She nods, and I think she's wishing him luck, but my lip-reading skills aren't highly developed. Fifty strides back to me, anxiety etched on his face. Damn right. Mrs. Robinson returns to the back room, closing the door behind her.

Edward frowns at me.

"Are you okay?" he asks, but his voice is strained, cautious.

"Not really. You didn't want to introduce me?" My voice sounds cold, hard.

His mouth drops open. He looks like I've pulled the rug from under his feet.

"But I thought…"

"For a bright man, sometimes…" Words fail me. "I'd like to go, please."

"Why?"

"You know why." I roll my eyes at him.

He gazes down at me, his eyes burning.

"I'm sorry, Bella. I didn't know she'd be here. She's never here. She's opened a new branch at the Bravern Center, and that's where she's normally based. Someone was sick today."

I turn on my heel and head for the door.

"We won't need Franco, thank you, Greta," Edward says quickly as we head out of the door. I have to suppress the impulse to run. I want to run fast and far away. I have an overwhelming urge to cry. I just need to get away from all this fuckedupness.

Edward walks beside me wordless as I try and mull all this over in my head. Wrapping my arms protectively around myself, I keep my head down, avoiding the trees on 2nd Avenue. Wisely, he makes no move to touch me. My mind is boiling with unanswered questions. Will Mr. Evasive 'fess up?

"You used to take your subs there?" I snap.

"Some of them, yes," he says quietly, his tone clipped.

"Lauren?"

"Yes."

"The place looks very new."

"It's been refurbished recently."

"I see. So Mrs. Robinson met all your subs."

"Yes."

"Did they know about her?"

"No. None of them did. Only you."

"But I'm not your sub."

"No, you most definitely are not."

I stop and face him. His eyes are wide, fearful. His lips are pressed into a hard, uncompromising line.

"Can you see how fucked up this is?" I glare up at him, my voice low.

"Yes. I'm sorry." And he has the grace to look contrite.

"I want to get my hair cut. Preferably somewhere where you haven't fucked either the staff or the clientele."

He flinches.

"Now, if you'll excuse me."

"You're not running. Are you?" he asks.

"No, I just want a damned haircut. Somewhere I can close my eyes and have someone wash my hair and forget about all this… baggage that accompanies you."

He runs his hand through his hair. "I can have Franco come to the apartment, or your place," he says quietly.

"She's very attractive."

He blinks at me. "Yes, she is."

"Is she still married?"

"No. She divorced about five years ago."

"Why aren't you with her?"

"Because that's over between us. I've told you this."

His brow creases suddenly. Holding his finger up, he fishes his BlackBerry out of his jacket pocket. It must be vibrating because I don't hear it ring.

"Jenks," he snaps, then listens. We are standing on 2nd Avenue and I gaze in the direction of the larch sapling in front of me, its leaves the newest green. People bustle past us, lost in their Saturday morning chores. No doubt contemplating their own personal dramas. I wonder if they include stalker ex-submissives, stunning ex-dommes and a man who has no concept of privacy under United States law.

"Killed in a car crash? When?" Edward interrupts my reverie.

Holy Crap. Who? I listen more closely.

“That’s twice that bastard’s not been forthcoming. He must know. Does he have no feelings for her whatsoever?” Edward shakes his head in disgust. “This is beginning to make sense… No... Explains why, but not where.” Edward glances around us, as if searching for something, and I find myself mirroring his actions. Nothing catches my eye, just the shoppers, the traffic and the trees.

“She’s here,” Edward continues. “She’s watching us... Yes… No. Two or Four, 24/7… I haven’t broached that yet.” Edward looks at me directly.

Broached what? I frown, at him and he regards me warily.

“What,” he whispers and pales, his eyes widening. “I see. When?... That recently? But how?... No background checks?... I see. Email the name, address, and photos if you have them…. 24/7, from this afternoon. Liaise with Taylor.” Edward hangs up.

“Well?” I ask, exasperated. Is he going to tell me?

“That was Jenks.”

“Who’s Jenks?”

“My security advisor.”

“Okay, so what’s happened?”

“Lauren up and left her husband about three months ago, and ran off with some guy. Who was killed in a car accident four weeks ago.”

“Oh.”

“The asshole shrink should have found that out,” he says angrily. “Grief, that’s what this is. Come.” He holds out his hand, and I automatically place mine in his, before I snatch it away again.

“Wait a minute. We were in the middle of a discussion, about us. About her, Mrs. Robinson.”

Edward’s face hardens.

“We can talk about it at my place.”

“I don’t want to go to your place. I want to get my hair cut!” I shout. If I can just focus on this one thing… He grabs his BlackBerry from his pocket again and dials a number.

“Greta, Edward Cullen. I want Franco at my place in an hour. Ask Mrs. Lincoln…. Good.” He puts his phone away. “He’s coming at one.”

“Edward!” I splutter, exasperated.

“Isabella, Lauren is obviously suffering a psychotic break. I don’t know if it’s you or me she’s after, or what lengths she’s prepared to go to. We’ll go to your place, pick up some clothes, and you can stay with me until we’ve tracked her down.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“So I can keep you safe.”

“But…”

He glares at me. “You are coming back to my apartment if I have to drag you there by your hair.”

I gape at him. This is beyond belief: Fifty Shades in Glorious Technicolor.

“I think you’re over-reacting.”

“I don’t. We can continue our discussion back at my place. Come.”

I fold my arms and glare at him. This has gone too far.

“No,” I state stubbornly. I have to make a stand.

“You can walk or I can carry you. I don’t mind either way, Isabella.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” I glower at him. Surely he wouldn’t make a scene on 2nd Avenue?

He half-smiles at me, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Oh baby, we both know that if you throw down the gauntlet, I’ll be only too happy to pick it up.”

We glare at each other, and abruptly he sweeps down, clasps me around my thighs, and lifts me. Before I know it, I am over his shoulder.

“Put me down!” I scream. Oh, it feels good to scream.

He starts striding along 2nd Avenue, ignoring me. Clasping his arm firmly around my thighs, he swats my behind with his free hand.

"Edward!" I shout.

People are staring. Could this be any more humiliating?

"I'll walk! I'll walk."

He puts me down, and before he's even stood upright, I stomp off in the direction of my apartment, seething, ignoring him. Of course he's by my side in moments, but I continue to ignore him. What am I going to do? I am so angry, but I'm not even sure what I am angry about. There's so much. As I stalk back to home, I make a mental list:

1. Shoulder carrying – unacceptable for anyone over the age of six.

2. Taking me to the salon he owns with his ex-lover – how stupid can he be?

3. The same place he took his submissives – same stupidity at work here.

4. Not even realizing that this was a bad idea – and he's supposed to be a bright guy.

5. Having mad ex-girlfriends… Can I blame him for that? I am so furious, yes I can.

6. Knowing my bank account number – that's just too stalkery by half.

7. Buying SIP – he's got more money than sense.

8. Insisting I stay with him – the threat from Lauren must be worse than he feared. He didn't mention that yesterday.

Oh no. Realization dawns. *Something's changed.* Oh crap. What could that be?

I halt, and Edward halts with me.

"What's happened?" I demand.

He knits his brow. "What do you mean?"

"With Lauren."

"I've told you."

"No, you haven't. There's something else. You didn't insist that I go to your place yesterday. So what's happened?"

He shifts uncomfortably.

"Edward! Tell me!" I snap.

"She managed to obtain a concealed weapons license yesterday."

Oh crap. I gaze at him, blinking, and feel the blood draining from my face as I absorb this news. I may faint. Suppose she wants to kill him? No…

"That means… she can just buy a gun," I whisper.

"Bella," he says, his voice full of concern. He places his hands on my shoulders, pulling me close to him. "I don't think she'll do anything stupid, but – I just don't want to take that risk with you."

"Not me. What about you?" I whisper.

He frowns down at me and I wrap my arms around him and hug him hard, my face against his chest. He doesn't seem to mind.

"Let's get back," he murmurs and he reaches down and kisses my hair, and that's it. All my fury, gone but not forgotten, dissipated under the threat of some harm coming to Edward. Oh jeez, the thought is unbearable.

Solemnly I pack a small case, and place my Mac, the BlackBerry and Echo Charlie in my backpack.

"Echo Charlie's coming, too?" Edward asks.

I nod and he gives me a small indulgent smile.

"Jasper is back Tuesday," I mutter.

"Jasper?"

"Rose's brother. He's staying here until he finds a place in Seattle."

Edward gazes at me blankly, but I notice the frostiness creep into his eyes.

“Well, it’s good that you’ll be staying with me. Give him more room,” he says quietly.

“I don’t know that he’s got keys. I’ll need to be back then.”

Edward gazes at me impassively, but says nothing.

“That’s everything.”

He grabs my case and we head out the door. As we walk round to the back of the building to the parking lot I’m aware that I am looking over my shoulder. I don’t know if my paranoia has taken over or if someone really is watching me. Edward opens the passenger door of the Volvo and looks at me expectantly.

“Are you getting in?” he asks.

“I thought I was driving.”

“No. I’ll drive.”

“Something wrong with my driving? Don’t tell me you know what I scored on my driving test. I wouldn’t be surprised, with your stalking tendencies.” Maybe he knows that I just scraped through the written test.

“Get in the car, Isabella,” he snaps angrily.

“Okay...” I hastily climb in. Honestly. Chill, will you? Perhaps he has the same uneasy feeling, too. Some dark sentinel watching us. Well, a pale, brunette with brown eyes who has an uncanny resemblance to yours truly. And quite possibly a concealed firearm.

Edward sets off into the traffic.

“Were all your submissives brunettes?”

He frowns, and glances at me quickly.

“Yes,” he mutters. I can hear the uncertainty in his voice, and I imagine him thinking, where’s she going with this?

“I just wondered.”

“I told you. I prefer brunettes.”

“Mrs. Robinson isn’t a brunette.”

“That’s probably why,” he mutters. “She put me off blondes forever.”

“You’re kidding,” I gasp.

“Yes. I’m kidding,” he replies, exasperated.

I stare impassively out of the window, spying brunettes everywhere. None of them Lauren, though. So, he only likes brunettes. I wonder why? Did Mrs. extraordinarily-glamorous-in-spite-of-being-old Robinson really put him off blondes? I shake my head. Edward Mindfuck Cullen.

“Tell me about her.”

“What do you want to know?” Edward’s brow furrows and his tone of voice tries to warn me off.

“Tell me about your business arrangement?”

He visibly relaxes, happy to talk about work.

“I am a silent partner. I’m not particularly interested in the beauty business, but she’s built it into a very successful venture. I just invested and helped get her started.”

“Why?”

“I owed it to her.”

“Oh?”

“When I dropped out of Harvard, she lent me $100,000 to start my business.”

Holy fuck. She’s rich, too.

“You dropped out?”

“It wasn’t my thing. I did two years. Unfortunately, my parents were not so understanding.”

I frown. Dr. Cullen and Esme disapproving, I just can’t picture it.

“Well, you don’t seem to have done too badly dropping out. What was your major?”

“Politics and Economics.”

Hmmm… figures.

“So she’s rich,” I murmur.

“She was a bored trophy wife, Isabella. Her husband was wealthy, big in lumber,” he smirks. “He wouldn’t let her work. You know, controlling… Some men are like that.” He gives me a quick sideways grin.

“Really? A controlling man? Surely a mythical creature?” I don’t think I can squeeze any more sarcasm into my response.

Edward’s grin gets bigger.

“She lent you her husband’s money.”

He nods, and a small mischievous smile appears on his lips.

“That’s terrible,” I mutter primly.

“He got his own back,” Edward says darkly as he pulls into the underground garage at Escala.

Oh.

“How?”

Edward shakes his head as if recalling a particularly sour memory and parks up beside his Audi.

“Come. Franco will be here shortly.”

In the elevator, Edward peers down at me.

“Still mad at me?” he asks matter-of-factly.

“Very.”

He nods. “Okay,” he says, and stares straight ahead.

Taylor is waiting for us when we arrive in the foyer. How does he always know? He takes my case.

“Has Jenks been in touch?” Edward asks.

"Yes, Sir."

"And?"

"Everything's arranged."

"Excellent. How's your daughter?"

"She's fine, thank you, Sir."

"Good. We have a hairdresser arriving at one. Franco De Luca."

"Miss Swan," Taylor nods at me.

"Hi, Taylor. You have a daughter?"

"Yes ma'am."

"How old is she?"

"She's seven."

Edward gazes at me impatiently.

"She lives with her mother," Taylor clarifies.

"Oh, I see."

Taylor smiles at me. This is so unexpected. Taylor's a father? I follow Edward into the great room, intrigued by this information. I glance around. I haven't been here since I walked out.

"Are you hungry?"

I shake my head. Edward gazes at me for a beat, and decides not to argue.

"I have to make a few calls. Make yourself at home."

"Okay."

Edward disappears into his study, leaving me standing in the huge art gallery, wondering what to do with myself. Clothes… Picking up my backpack, I wander upstairs to my bedroom and check out the walk-in closet. It's still full of clothes, all brand new, still with price tags and labels. Three long evening dresses, three cocktail dresses, and three more for

everyday wear. All this must have cost a fortune. I check the tag on one of the evening dresses: $1,998. *Holy fuck.* I sink to the floor. This isn't me. I put my head in my hands and try to process the last few hours. It's so exhausting. Why oh why have I fallen for someone who is plain crazy. Beautiful, sexy as fuck, richer than Croesus, and crazy, with a capital K.

I fish my BlackBerry out of my backpack and call my mom.

"Bella, honey! It's been so long. How are you, darling?"

"Oh... you know…"

"What's wrong? Still not worked it out with Edward?"

"Mom, it's complicated. I think he's nuts. That's the problem."

"Tell me about it. Men. There's just no reading them sometimes. Phil's wondering if our move to Florida was a good one."

"What?"

"Oh, yeah, he's talking about going back to Phoenix."

Oh… someone else has problems. I am not the only one.

Edward appears at the door. "There you are. I thought you'd run off." His relief is obvious.

I hold my hand up to indicate that I'm on the phone.

"Sorry, Mom, I have to go. I'll call again soon."

"Okay, honey. Take care of yourself. Love you!"

"Love you too, Mom."

I hang up and gaze at Fifty. He frowns, looking strangely awkward.

"Why are you hiding in here?" he asks softly.

"I'm not hiding. I'm despairing."

"Despairing?"

"Of all this, Edward." I wave my hand in the general direction of the clothes.

"Can I come in?"

"It's your closet."

He frowns again and sits down, cross-legged, facing me.

"They're just clothes. If you don't like them I'll send them back."

"You're a lot to take on, you know?"

He blinks at me and scratches his chin, his stubbly chin. My fingers itch to touch him.

"I know. I'm trying," he murmurs.

"You're very trying."

"As are you, Miss Swan."

"Why are you doing this?"

His eyes widen and his wary look returns.

"You know why."

"No, I don't."

He runs a hand through his hair.

"You are one frustrating female."

"You could have a nice brunette submissive. One who'd say, 'how high?' every time you said jump, provided of course she had permission to speak. So why me, Edward? I just don't get it."

He gazes at me for a moment, and I have no idea what he's thinking.

"You make me look at the world differently, Isabella. You don't want me for my money. You give me… hope," he says softly.

What? Mr. Cryptic is back.

"Hope of what?"

He shrugs.

"More," he says quietly. "And you're right. I am used to women doing exactly what I say, when I say. Doing exactly what I want. It gets old quickly. There's something about you, Isabella, that calls to me, on some deep level that I don't understand. It's a siren's call. I can't resist you, and I don't want to lose you." He reaches forward and takes my hand. "Don't run, please. Have a little faith in me, and a little patience. Please."

He looks so vulnerable. Jeez, it's disturbing. Leaning up on my knees I bend forward and kiss him gently on his lips.

"Okay. Faith and patience. I can live with that."

"Good. Because Franco's here."

Franco is small, dark, and gay. I love him.

"Such beautiful hair!" he gushes with an outrageous, probably fake Italian accent. I bet he's from Baltimore or somewhere, but his enthusiasm is infectious. Edward leads us both into his bathroom, exits hurriedly, and re-enters carrying a chair from his room.

"I'll leave you two to it," he mutters.

"*Grazie*, Mr Cullen," Franco exclaims, and turns to me. "*Bene,* Isabella. What shall we do with you?"

Edward is sitting on his couch ploughing through what look like spreadsheets. Soft, gentle, classical music drifts through the great room, and the sweet sound of a woman singing passionately. Edward glances up and smiles.

"See! I tell you he like it," Franco enthuses.

"You look lovely, Bella," Edward says appreciatively.

"My work 'ere is done." Franco preens himself. Edward rises and strolls towards us.

"Thank you, Franco."

Franco turns, grasps me in an overwhelming bear hug, and kisses both my cheeks.

"Never let anyone else be cutting your hair, *bella* Isabella!"

I laugh, slightly embarrassed by his familiarity. Edward shows him to the door and returns moments later.

“I’m glad you kept it long,” he says as he walks towards me, green eyes glowing. He takes a strand between his fingers. “So soft,” he murmurs, gazing down at me.

“Are you still mad at me?”

I nod and he smiles.

“What precisely are you mad at me about?”

I roll my eyes. “You want the list?”

“There’s a list?”

“A long one.”

“Can we discuss it in bed?”

“No.” I pout at him childishly.

“Over lunch, then. I’m hungry, and not just for food.” He gives me a salacious smile.

“I am not going to let you dazzle me with your sexpertise.”

He stifles a smile.

“What is bothering you specifically, Miss Swan? Spit it out.”

Okay. “What’s bothering me? Well, there’s your gross invasion of my privacy. The fact that you took me to some place where you used to take all your lovers to have their bits waxed, where your ex-mistress works. You man-handled me in the street like I was six years old. And to cap it all, you let your Mrs. Robinson touch you!” My voice has risen to a crescendo.

He raises his eyebrows, and his good humor vanishes.

“That’s quite a list. But just to clarify, she’s not ‘my Mrs. Robinson’."

“She can touch you,” I repeat.

He purses his lips.

“She knows where.”

“What does that mean?”

He runs both hands through his hair and closes his eyes briefly, like he’s seeking divine guidance of some kind. He swallows.

“You and I don’t have any rules. I have never had a relationship without rules, and I never know where you’re going to touch me. It makes me nervous. Your touch completely –” he stops, searching for the words. “It just means more. So much more.”

I blink at him. His answer’s completely unexpected, and there’s that little word with the big meaning hanging between us again. My touch means more. *Holy cow.*

Chapter 61

Oh, how am I supposed to resist when he says this stuff? Green eyes search mine, watching, apprehensive. Tentatively, I reach out, and apprehension shifts to alarm. Edward steps back, and I drop my hand.

"Hard limit," he whispers urgently, a pained, panicked look on his face.

I can't help but feel a crushing disappointment.

"How would you feel if you couldn't touch me?"

"Devastated and deprived," he says immediately.

Oh, my Fifty Shades. Shaking my head, I offer him a reassuring smile, and he relaxes.

"You'll have to tell me exactly why this is a hard limit. One day, please."

"One day," he murmurs, and seems to snap out of his vulnerability in a nanosecond. How can he switch so quickly? He's just so capricious.

"So, the rest of your list… Invading your privacy." His mouth twists as he contemplates this. "Because I know your bank account number?"

"Yes. That's outrageous."

"I do background checks on all my submissives. I'll show you."

He turns and heads for his study. I dutifully follow him, dazed. From a locked filing cabinet, he pulls a manila folder. Typed on the tab: ISABELLA MARIE SWAN.

Holy fucking *shit*. I glare at him.

He shrugs apologetically.

"You can keep it," he says quietly.

"Well, gee, thanks," I snap at him.

I flick through the contents. He has a copy of my birth certificate, for heaven's sake. My hard limits… Jeez, my social security number, employment records...

"So you knew I worked at Newton's?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't a co-incidence. You didn't just drop by?"

"No."

I don't know whether to be angry or flattered.

"This is fucked up. You know that?"

"I don't see it that way. What I do. I have to be careful."

"But this is private stuff."

"I don't misuse the information. Anyone can get ahold of it if they half a mind to, Isabella. To have control, I need information. It's how I've always operated." He gazes at me, his expression guarded and unreadable.

"You do misuse the information. You deposited twenty-four thousand dollars into my account that I didn't want."

His mouth presses in a hard line.

"I told you. That's what Taylor managed to get for your truck. Unbelievable I know, but true."

"But the Volvo…"

"Isabella, do you have any idea how much money I make?"

I flush. Of course not.

"No, why should I? I don't need to know the bottom line of your bank account, Edward."

His eyes soften.

"I know. That's one of the things I love about you."

I gaze at him. *Love about me…*

"Isabella, I earn roughly one hundred thousand dollars an hour."

My mouth drops open. That is an obscene amount of money.

“Twenty-four thousand is nothing. The car, the Tess books, the clothes… they’re nothing.” His voice is soft.

I gaze at him. He really has no idea. Extraordinary.

“If you were me, how would you feel about all this… err – largesse, coming your way?”

He stares at me blankly. And there it is, his problem in a nutshell: empathy or the lack thereof. The silence stretches between us. Finally, he shrugs.

“I don’t know,” he says and he looks genuinely bemused.

My heart swells. This is it, the crux of his Fifty Shades, surely. He can’t put himself in my shoes. Well, now I know.

“It doesn’t feel great. I mean, you’re very generous, but it makes me uncomfortable. I have told you this enough times.”

He sighs.

“I want to give you the world, Isabella,” he says softly.

“I just want you, Edward. Not all the add-ons.”

“They’re part of the deal. Part of what I am.”

Oh, this is going nowhere.

“Shall we eat?” I ask. This tension between us is so draining.

He frowns. “Sure.”

“I’ll cook.”

“Good, otherwise it’s stuff from the fridge.”

“Mrs. Cope is off at weekends? So you mostly eat cold cuts at weekends?”

“No.”

“Oh?”

He sighs.

“My submissives cook, Isabella.”

“Oh, of course.” I flush. How could I be so stupid? I smile sweetly at him. “What would Sir like to eat?”

He smirks.

“Whatever Madam can find.”

Inspecting the impressive contents of the fridge, I decide on Spanish omelet. There are even cold potatoes – perfect. It’s quick and easy. Edward is still in his study, no doubt invading some poor unsuspecting fool’s privacy and compiling information. The thought is bitter and unpleasant. I am reeling. He just knows no bounds.

I need music, if I am going to cook. I am going to cook un-submissively! I wander over to the iPod dock beside the fireplace. Edward’s iPod… more of Lauren’s choices on here, no doubt. I dread the very idea. Where is she? What does she want? I shudder. What a legacy. I can’t wrap my head around it.

I scroll through the extensive list. I want something upbeat. Hmmm, Beyoncé – not very Edward. *Crazy in Love*. Oh, YES! How apt. I hit the repeat and put it on loud.

I dance back to the fridge and take out the eggs… find a bowl, crack them open, begin to whisk.

Raiding the fridge once more, I gather potatoes, ham, yes, peas in the freezer… all of those will do. Finding a pan, I place it on the stove, put a little oil in and go back to whisking.

No empathy, I muse. Is this unique to Edward? Maybe all men are like this, baffled by women. I just don’t know. Perhaps it’s not such a revelation. I wish Rose was home, she would know. She’s been away forever. She should be back at the end of the week, after her additional vacation with Emmett. I wonder if it's still lust at first sight for them.

One of the things I love about you… I stop whisking. He said it. Does that mean there are other things? I smile for the first time since this morning, a genuine, heartfelt, face-splitting smile.

Edward slips his arms around me, making me jump.

“Interesting choice of music,” he purrs as he kisses me below my ear. “Hmm, your hair smells good,” he nuzzles my hair and inhales deeply. Desire uncurls in my belly. No. I shrug out of his embrace.

“I’m still mad at you.”

He frowns.

“How long are you going to keep this up?” he asks, dragging a hand through his hair.

I shrug.

“At least until I’ve eaten.”

He gazes at me and his lips twitch with amusement. He turns, picks up the remote control from the counter and switches off the music.

“Did you put that on your iPod?”

He shakes his head slowly, somberly, and I know it was her.

“Don’t you think she was trying to tell you something back then?”

“Well, with hindsight probably,” he says quietly.

QED… no empathy. My subconscious crosses her arms and smack her lips.

“Why’s it still on there?”

“I quite like the song. But if it offends you, I'll remove it.”

“No, it’s fine. I just like to cook to music.”

“What would you like to hear?”

“Surprise me.”

He smirks at me briefly and heads over to the iPod dock, while I go back to my whisking. Moments later a familiar tune begins, an erratic staccato drum beat, then a piano, and a sweet rasping male voice starts to sing.

Please forgive me if I act a little strange

For I know not what I do

I flush, turning to gape at Edward’s audacity. His look has changed, the levity gone, his eyes darker, intense.

Feels like lightning running through my veins

Every time I look at you

Crap. Life imitating art. How does he do this? I watch him, enthralled, as very slowly, like the predator he is, he stalks me. Wearing just an untucked white shirt, jeans, and a smoldering look. He's barefoot.

Help me out here, all my words are falling short

And there's so much I want to say

I wanna tell you just how good it feels

When you look at me that way

"Edward, please," I whisper, the whisk redundant in my hand.

"Please what?"

"Don't do this."

"Do what?"

"This…"

He's standing in front of me, gazing down at me.

"Are you sure?" he breathes.

So I wont ever have to lose you girl

Won't ever have to say goodbye

Reaching over, he takes the whisk from my hand and places it back in the bowl with the eggs. My heart is in my mouth. I don't want this. I do want this, badly. He's so… frustrating… He's so… hot, desirable. I tear my gaze away from his spellbinding look.

"I really want you, Isabella," he murmurs. "I love and I hate and I love arguing with you. It's… very new. I need to know that we're okay. It's the only way I know how."

"My feelings for you haven't changed," I whisper. His proximity is overwhelming, exhilarating. The familiar pull is there, all my synaptic impulses, goading me towards him,

my inner goddess at her most libidinous. Staring at the patch of hair in the v of his shirt, I want to run my tongue through it.

He's so close, but he doesn't touch me. I can feel his heat warming my blood.

"I'm not going to touch you, until you say yes," he says softly. "But right now, after a really shitty morning, I want to bury myself in you, and just forget everything except us."

Us… A magic combination. A small potent pronoun, that clinches the deal. I raise my head to stare at his beautiful serious face.

"I'm going to touch your face," I breathe, and I can see the surprise reflected briefly in his eyes, before his acceptance registers. Lifting my hand, I gently caress his cheek and run my fingertips across his stubble. He closes his eyes, and exhales, leaning his face into my touch.

He leans down slowly and my lips automatically lift to meet his. He hovers over me.

"Yes or no, Isabella?" he whispers

"Yes," I breathe and his mouth closes on mine softly, coaxing, coercing my lips apart, as his arms fold around me, pulling me to him. His hand moves up my back, fingers tangling in the hair at the back of my head and tugging gently, while his other hand flattens on my behind, forcing me against him. I moan softly.

"Mr. Cullen." Taylor coughs and Edward releases me immediately.

"Taylor," he says coldly.

I whirl around to see an uncomfortable Taylor standing on the threshold of the great room. Edward and Taylor stare at each other, some unspoken communication.

"My study," Edward snaps, and Taylor walks briskly across the room.

"Rain check," Edward whispers to me, and follows him.

I take a deep, steadying breath. Holy crap. Can I not resist him for one minute? I shake my head, grateful for Taylor's interruption, embarrassing though it is. I wonder what Taylor has interrupted in the past. I don't want to think about that. Lunch. I'll make lunch. I busy myself slicing potatoes. What does Taylor want? My mind boggles.

Ten minutes later they emerge, just as the omelet is ready. Edward looks pre-occupied as he glances at me.

“I’ll brief them in ten,” he says to Taylor.

“Sir,” Taylor answers and leaves the great room.

I produce two warmed plates and place them on the kitchen island.

“Lunch?”

“Please,” Edward says as he perches on one of the bar stools. Now he’s watching me carefully.

“Problem?”

“No, not really.”

I grimace at him. He’s not telling me. I dish out lunch and sit down beside him.

“This is good,” Edward murmurs appreciatively as he takes a bite. “Would you like a glass of wine?”

“No, thank you.” I need to keep a clear head around you, Cullen.

It does taste good. If I’m honest, I am not that hungry, but I know Edward will nag. We both eat in silence, brooding. Eventually, Edward reaches for the iPod remote and switches on the classical piece I heard earlier.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Canteloube, Songs of the Auvergne. This is called Bailero.”

“It’s lovely. What language is it?”

“It’s an old French language, a dialect from the Occitan language. I forget what it’s called.”

“But you speak French.” Memories of the flawless French he spoke at his parents’ dinner come to mind.

“Yes.” Edward smiles, visibly relaxing. “My mother had a mantra: musical instrument, foreign language, martial art. Emmett speaks Spanish, Alice and I speak French. Emmett plays guitar, I play piano, and Alice the cello.”

“Wow. And the martial arts?”

"Emmett does Judo, Alice put her foot down at age twelve and refused." He smirks at the memory.

"I wish my mother had been that organized."

"Esme is formidable when it comes to the accomplishments of her children."

"She must be very proud of you. I would be."

A dark thought flashes across Edward's face and he looks momentarily uncomfortable, regarding me warily, as if he's in uncharted territory.

"Have you decided what you'll wear this evening? Or do I need to come and pick something for you?" His tone is suddenly brusque.

Whoa. He sounds angry. Why? What have I said?

"Err… not yet. Did you choose all those clothes?"

"No, Isabella, I didn't. I gave a list to a personal shopper at Neiman Marcus, with your size. They should fit. Just so that you know, I have ordered additional security for this evening and over the next few days. With Lauren unpredictable and unaccounted for on the streets of Seattle, I think it's a wise precaution. I don't want you going out unaccompanied. Okay?"

I blink at him. "Err… okay." What happened to I-must-have-you-now-Cullen?

"Good. I'm going to brief them. I shouldn't be long."

"They're here?"

"Yes."

Where?

Collecting his plate, Edward places it in the sink, and disappears from the room. What the hell was that about? He's like several different people in one body. Isn't that a symptom of schizophrenia? I must Google that on the Mac. I clear my plate, wash up quickly, and head back up to 'my' bedroom carrying the ISABELLA MARIE SWAN dossier. Back in the walk-in closet, I pull out the three long evening dresses. Now… which one?

"What are you doing?" Edward inquires softly.

I am lying across the bed looking at my Mac as Edward enters. I panic briefly, wondering if I should let him see the website I'm on. *Multiple Personality Disorder: The Symptoms.*

Stretching out beside me, he eyes the webpage with amusement.

"On this site for a reason?" he asks nonchalantly.

Brusque Edward has gone, playful Edward is back. How the hell am I supposed to keep up with this?

"Research. Into a difficult personality." I give him my most deadpan look.

His lips twitch with a suppressed smile.

"A difficult personality?"

"My own pet project."

"I'm a pet project now? A sideline. Science experiment, maybe. When I thought I was everything. Miss Swan, you wound me."

"How do you know it's you?"

"Wild guess," he smirks.

"It's true that you are the only fucked up, mercurial control freak that I know… intimately."

"I thought I was the only person you know intimately."

I flush suddenly.

"Yes, that too."

"Have you reached any conclusions yet?"

I turn and gaze at him. He's on his side, stretched out beside me, his head resting on his elbow. His expression soft, amused.

"I think you're in need of intense therapy."

He reaches up and gently tucks my hair behind my ears.

"I think I'm in need of you. Here." He hands me a tube of lipstick.

I frown at him, perplexed. It's harlot red, not my color at all.

"You want me to wear this?" I squeak.

He laughs.

"No, Isabella, not unless you want to. Not sure it's your color," he finishes dryly.

He sits up on the bed, cross-legged, and drags his shirt off over his head.

Oh my.

"I like your road map idea."

I stare at him blankly… road map?

"The no-go areas," he says by way of explanation.

"Oh. I was kidding," I breathe.

"I'm not."

"You want me to draw on you… with lipstick?"

"It washes off. Eventually."

A small smile of wonder plays on my lips, and I smirk at him.

"What about something more permanent, like a Sharpie?"

"I could get a tattoo." His eyes are alight with humor.

Edward Cullen with a tatt? Marring his lovely body, when it's marked in so many ways already? No way!

"I poo poo the tattoo," I laugh.

He grins. "Lipstick, then."

I sit up. Oh, this could be fun.

"Come." He holds his hands out to me. "Sit on me."

I push my pumps off my feet, scramble into a sitting position, and crawl over to him. He lies down on the bed but keeps his knees flexed.

"Lean against my legs."

I clamber over him and sit astride as instructed. His eyes are wide, cautious, but he's amused too.

"You seem – enthusiastic for this," he comments dryly.

"Oh, I'm always eager for information, Mr. Cullen. And it means you'll relax, because I'll know where the boundaries lie."

He shakes his head, as if he can't quite believe that he's about to let me draw all over his body.

"Open the lipstick," he orders.

Oh, he's in über bossy mode, but I don't care.

"Give me your hand."

I give him my other hand.

"The one with the lipstick." He rolls his eyes at me.

"Are you rolling your eyes at me?"

"Yep."

"That's very rude, Mr. Cullen. I know some people who get positively violent at eye rolling."

"Do you now?" His tone is ironic.

I give him the hand that is clasping the lipstick and suddenly he sits up, so we are nose to nose.

"Ready?" he asks in a low soft murmur that makes everything tighten and tense inside me, before liquifying deliciously.*Oh wow.*

"Yes," I breathe. His proximity is so alluring, his toned flesh is so close, his Edward smell mixed with my body wash. He guides my hand up to the curve of his shoulder.

“Press down,” he says softly and my mouth goes dry as he directs my hand down, from the top of his shoulder down the side of his chest, across his stomach. He tenses and stares, seemingly impassive, into my eyes, but beneath his careful blank look. I can see his restraint, his aversion held in strict check. The line of his jaw is strained and I can see the tension around his eyes.

Midway across his stomach he murmurs, “And up the other side.” He releases my hand.

I mirror the line I’ve drawn on his left side. The trust he’s giving me is heady, and I can I count his pain. Seven small, round white scars, dotted on his chest, and it’s deep dark purgatory to see this hideous, evil, desecration of his beautiful body.

“There, done,” I whisper, containing my emotion.

“Oh no you’re not,” he replies, and traces a line with his long index finger around the base of his neck. I follow the line of his finger with a scarlet streak. Finishing, I gaze into the green depths of his eyes.

“Now my back,” he breathes. He shifts so I have to climb off him, then turns around on the bed and sits cross-legged, with his back to me.

“Follow the line from my chest, all the way around to the other side.” His voice is low and husky.

I do as he says until a crimson gash runs across the middle of his back, and I count more scars, nine in all. I have to fight the overwhelming need I have to kiss each one, and stop the tears pooling in my eyes. Who could do this to a child? His head is down, his body tense, as I complete the circuit around his back.

“Around your neck, too?” I breathe.

He nods, and I draw another line, joining the first around the base of his neck, beneath his hairline.

“Finished,” I murmur, and it looks like he’s wearing a bizarre skin-colored vest, with a harlot red trim.

His shoulders slump slightly as he relaxes and he turns slowly to face me once again.

“Those are the boundaries,” he says quietly, his eyes dark, pupils dilated, from fear? From lust? I want to hurl myself at him, but I restrain myself, and gaze at him in wonder.

“I can live with those. Right now I want to launch myself at you,” I mumble.

He gives me a wicked smile and holds out his hands, a gesture of supplication.

“Well, Miss Swan… I’m all yours.”

I squeal with childish delight and catapult myself into his arms, knocking him flat. He twists, letting out a boyish laugh, and I can hear his relief that the ordeal is over, as somehow I end up beneath him on the bed.

“Now, about that rain check,” he breathes and his mouth claims mine once more.

Chapter 62

My mouth is feverish against Edward's, consuming him, relishing his tongue against mine, and he's the same, devouring me. It's heavenly. Suddenly he drags me up and grasps the hem of my t-shirt, whipping it over my head and throwing it on the floor.

"I want to feel you," he mutters greedily against my mouth as his hands move behind me to undo my bra. In one smooth move, it's off and he tosses it aside, following the same fate as my t-shirt. He pushes me back down onto the bed, pressing me into the mattress, his mouth and hand moving to my breasts. My fingers curl into his hair as he takes one of my nipples between his lips and tugs hard. I cry out as the sensation sweeps through my body and spikes and tightens all the muscles deep in my groin.

"Yes baby, let me hear you," he murmurs against my overheated skin. Boy, I want him – now – inside me. His mouth toys with my nipple, pulling at it, making me squirm and writhe, yearning for him. I can sense his longing mixed with – what? Veneration, like he's worshipping me. He teases me with his fingers, my nipple growing hard and elongating under his skillful touch. His hand moves to my jeans and he deftly undoes the button, tugs the zipper down and slips his hand inside my panties, sliding his fingers against my sex. His breath hisses out as his finger glides into me. I push my pelvis up into the heel of his hand and he responds, rubbing against me.

"Oh baby," he breathes as he hovers over me, staring intently into my eyes. "You're so wet." And I can hear the wonder in his voice.

I flush. "I want you," I murmur.

And his mouth joins with mine again. I can feel his hungry desperation, his need for me. This is new, it's never been like this, except perhaps when I came back from Florida, and his words from earlier drift back to me. *I need to know we're okay. This is the only way I know how.* The thought unravels me, to know that I have such an effect on him, can offer him so much solace. My inner goddess purrs with pure pleasure. He sits up, grasps the hem of my jeans and tugs them off, followed by my panties.

Keeping his eyes fixed on mine, he stands, takes a foil packet out of his pocket, and throws it at me, then removes his jeans and boxers in one swift motion. I rip the packet open greedily and when he lays beside me again, very slowly roll the condom on to him. He grabs both my hands and lies down on the bed.

"You. On top," he orders, pulling me astride him. "I want to see you."

Oh. He guides me and very hesitantly, I ease myself down onto him. He slowly closes his eyes and flexes his hips to meet me, filling me, stretching me. His mouth forms a perfect

capital O as he exhales. Oh, that feels so good, possessing him, possessing me. He holds my hands, and I don't know if it's to steady me or keep me from touching him, even though I have my road map.

"You feel so good," he murmurs.

I rise again, heady with the power I have over him, watching Edward Cullen slowly coming apart beneath me. He lets go of my hands and grabs my hips, and I place my hands on his arms. He thrusts into me sharply, causing me to cry out.

"That's right baby, feel me," he says, his voice strained.

I tip my head back and do exactly that. This is what he does so well. I move, countering his rhythm, in perfect symmetry, numbing all thought and reason. I am just sensation, lost in this void of pleasure. Up and down, again and again... Oh. Opening my eyes, I stare down at him, my breathing ragged, and he's staring back at me, eyes blazing.

"My Bella," he mouths.

"Yes," I rasp. "Always," I whisper.

And he groans loudly, closing his eyes again, tipping his head back. Oh my. Seeing Edward undone is enough to seal my fate and I come, audibly, exhaustingly, spinning down and around, collapsing on top of him.

"Oh baby," he groans as he finds his release, holding me still and letting go.

My head is on his chest, in the no-go area, my cheek nestled against the springy hair on his sternum. I am panting, glowing, and I resist the urge to pucker my lips and kiss him. I just lie on top of him, catching my breath. He smoothes my hair, and his hand runs down my back, caressing me softly, as his breathing calms.

"You are so beautiful," he murmurs.

I lift my head to gaze at him, my expression skeptical. He frowns in response and sits up quickly, taking me by surprise, his arm sweeping round to hold me in place. I clutch his arms. We are nose to nose.

"You. Are. Beautiful," he says again, his tone emphatic.

"And you are amazingly sweet sometimes." I kiss him gently.

He lifts me slightly and eases out of me. I wince as he does. Leaning forward, he kisses me softly.

“You have no idea how attractive you are, do you?”

I flush. Why’s he going on about this?

“All those boys pursuing you. That isn’t enough of a clue?”

“Boys? What boys?”

“You want the list?” Edward frowns. “The photographer, he’s mad about you, that boy in the camping shop, your roommate’s brother. Your boss,” he adds bitterly.

“Oh Edward, that’s just not true.”

“Trust me, they want you. They want what’s mine.” He pulls me against him and I lift my arms to his shoulders, my hands in his hair, regarding him with amusement.

“Mine,” he repeats, green eyes glowing.

“Yes, yours,” I reassure him, smiling.

He looks mollified, and I feel perfectly comfortable, naked in his lap, on a bed in the full light of a Saturday afternoon. Who would have thought? The lipstick marks remain on his exquisite body. Though I note some smears on the duvet cover, and wonder briefly what Mrs. Cope will make of them. That reminds me…

“I want to go exploring.”

He looks at me quizzically, “The apartment?"

“The apartment? Err, no, I was thinking of the treasure map that we’ve drawn on you.”

His eyebrows lift in surprise and he blinks at me. I rub my nose against his.

“And what would that entail exactly, Miss Swan?”

I lift my hand and run my fingertips down this face. “I just want to touch you everywhere I’m allowed.”

Edward playfully catches my index finger in his teeth, biting down gently.

“Ow…” I protest softly and he grins, a low growl coming from his throat.

"Okay," he says, releasing my finger, but I can hear his uncertainty. "Wait." He leans behind me, lifting me again, and removes his condom, dropping it unceremoniously on the floor beside the bed.

"I hate those things. I've a good mind to call Dr. Greene to give you a shot."

"You think the top OBGYN in Seattle is going to come running?" I mutter skeptically.

"I can be very persuasive," he murmurs, hooking my hair behind my ear. "Franco's done a great job on your hair. I like these layers."

What?

"Stop changing the subject."

He shifts me back so I'm sitting on the bed between his propped-up knees, my legs bent straddling him, my feet on either side of his hips. He leans back on his arms.

"Touch away," he says seriously, no humor in his eyes. He looks nervous, but he's trying to hide it. Keeping my eyes on his, I reach down and trace my finger underneath the lipstick line, across his finely sculptured abdominal muscles.

He flinches ever so slightly and I stop.

"I don't have to," I whisper.

"No, it's fine. Just takes some… readjustment on my part. No one's had free rein over my body for a long time," he murmurs.

"Mrs. Robinson?" I ask softly, and amazingly manage to keep all bitterness and rancor out of my voice.

He nods, his discomfort obvious. "I don't want to talk about that right now. It will sour your good mood."

"I can handle it."

"No you can't, Bella. You see red whenever I mention her. My past is my past. It's a fact. I can't change it. I'm lucky that you don't have one, because it would drive me crazy if you did."

I frown at him, but I don't want to fight.

“Drive you crazy? More than you are already?” I smile, hoping to lighten the atmosphere between us.

His lips twitch.

“Crazy for you,” he whispers.

My heart swells with joy. *Oh… my.*

“Shall I call Dr. Banner?”

“I don’t think that will be necessary,” he says dryly.

Placing my fingers back on his belly, I let them drift down to his navel, and southwards along his happy, happy trail. His mouth opens slightly as his breathing changes. His eyes darken. I can feel his erection stir and twitch against me. Oh… round two.

“Again?” I murmur.

He smiles. “Oh yes, Miss Swan, again.”

What a delicious way to spend a Saturday afternoon. I stand beneath the shower, absentmindedly washing myself, careful not to wet my tied-back hair, contemplating the last couple of hours. Edward and vanilla… seems to be going well. He’s revealed so much today. It’s staggering trying to keep up, and to reflect on what I’ve learned; salary details – holy crap he’s stinking rich, and for someone so young – it’s just extraordinary. The dossiers he has on me and on all his brunette submissives. I wonder if they are all in that filing cabinet. My subconscious purses her lips at me and shakes her head. *Don’t even go there.* I frown. Just a quick peek?

And there’s Lauren, with a gun, potentially, somewhere, and her crap taste in music still on his iPod. But even worse, Mrs. Paedo Robinson. So much to understand about her, and I don’t want to. I don’t want her to be a shimmering-haired specter in our relationship. He’s right, I do go off the deep end when I think of her, so perhaps it’s best if I don’t. I clamber out of the shower and dry myself, feeling angry suddenly.

But who wouldn’t? What normal, sane person would do that to a fifteen-year-old boy? How much has she contributed to his fuckedupness? But he says she helped him – how? And I think of his scars, the physical embodiment of a horrific childhood, a sickening reminder of the mental scars he bears. My sweet, sad Fifty Shades. He’s said such lovely things today. I stare at my reflection. He’s crazy for me… I smile at the memory of his words, my heart brimming once more, and my face transforms with a ridiculous smile. Perhaps we can

make this work, but how long will he want to do this, without wanting to beat the crap out of me? My smile dissolves. This is what I don't know. The shadow that hangs over us. Kinky fuckery… yes, I can do that, but more? My subconscious stares at me blankly, for once offering no snarky words of wisdom. I head back to my bedroom to dress.

Edward is downstairs getting ready, doing whatever he's doing, so I have the bedroom to myself. As well as all the dresses in the closet, I have drawers full of new underwear. I select a black bustier corset creation with a price tag of $460. It has silver trim like filigree, and the briefest of panties to match. Hold-ups too, in a natural color… so fine, pure silk. Wow, they feel really… slinky, and kinda hot. Yeah. I am reaching for the dress when Edward enters unannounced. *Jeez, you could knock!* He stands immobilized, staring at me, green eyes glowing hungrily. I blush crimson, everywhere, it feels. He wears a white shirt and black suit pants. The neck of his shirt is open. I can see the lipstick line still in place, and he's still staring.

"Can I help you, Mr. Cullen? I assume there is some purpose to your visit other than to gawp mindlessly at me."

"I am rather enjoying my mindless gawp, thank you, Miss Swan," he murmurs darkly, stepping further into the room, drinking me in. "Remind me to send a personal note of thanks to Caroline Acton."

I frown. Who the hell is *she*?

"The personal shopper at Neimans," he says, spookily answering my unspoken question.

"Oh."

"I'm quite distracted."

"I can see that. What do you want, Edward?" I give him my no-nonsense stare.

He retaliates with his crooked smile, and pulls the silver ball egg-things from his pocket, stopping me in my tracks. *Holy shit!* He wants to spank me? Now? Why?

"It's not what you think," he says quickly.

"Enlighten me," I whisper.

"I thought you could wear these tonight."

And the implications of that sentence hang between us as the idea sinks in.

"To this event?" I breathe.

He nods slowly, his eyes darkening.

Oh… my.

"Will you spank me later?"

"No."

For a moment, I feel a tiny fleeting stab of disappointment.

He chuckles. "You want me to?"

I swallow. I just don't know.

"Well, rest assured I am not going to touch you like that, not even if you beg me. Do you want to play this game?" he says, holding up the balls. "You can always take them out if it gets too much."

I gaze at him. He looks so wickedly tempting… unkempt, recently-fucked hair, dark eyes dancing with erotic thoughts, that beautiful sculptured mouth, lips raised slightly with a sexy, amused smile.

"Okay," I acquiesce softly. *Hell yes!* My Inner Goddess has found her voice and is shouting from the rooftops.

"Good girl," Edward grins. "Come here, and I'll put them in, once you've put your shoes on."

My shoes? I turn and glance at the emerald green suede stilettos that match the dress I've chosen to wear. Humor him! my Inner Goddess barks at me. He holds out his hand to support me while I step into the Christian Louboutin shoes, a snip at $695. I must be at least five inches taller now. He leads me to the bedside, and doesn't sit, but walks over to the only chair in the room. Picking it up, he carries it over and places it in front of me.

"When I nod, you are to bend down and hold on to the chair. Understand?" His voice is husky.

"Yes."

"Good. Now open your mouth," he breathes.

I do as I'm told, thinking that he's going to put the balls in my mouth again to lubricate them. No, he slips his index finger in… Oh.

"Suck," he says. I reach up and clasp his hand, holding him steady, and do as I'm told. *See, I can be obedient, when I want.* He tastes of soap. Hmmm. I suck hard. His eyes widen slightly and his mouth opens a fraction. I'm not going to need any lubricant at this rate. He puts the balls in his mouth as I fellate his finger, twirling my tongue around it. When he tries to withdraw it, I clamp my teeth down.

He grins, then shakes his head, admonishing me, so I let him go. He nods, and I bend down, and grasp the sides of the chair. I feel him move my panties to one side and very slowly slide his finger into me, circling slowly, so I can feel him on all sides. I can't help the moan that escapes from my lips.

He withdraws his finger briefly, and slowly inserts the balls, one at a time, pushing them deep inside me. Once they are in position, he smoothes my panties back into place and kisses my backside. Then he runs his hands up each of my legs from ankle to thigh, and gently kisses the top of each thigh where my hold-ups finish.

"You have fine, fine legs, Miss Swan," he murmurs.

Standing, he grasps my hips and pulls my behind against him, and I can feel his erection.

"Maybe I'll have you this way when we get home, Isabella. You can stand now."

I feel giddy, beyond aroused, the weight of the balls pushing and pulling inside me. Leaning down from behind me, Edward kisses my shoulder.

"I bought these for you, for last Saturday's ball." He puts his arm around me and holds out his hand. In his palm sits a small red box with *Cartier* inscribed on the lid. "But you left me, so I never had the opportunity to give them to you."

Oh.

"So, this is my second chance," he murmurs, and I can hear the stiffness in his voice. He's nervous. Tentatively, I reach for the box, and open it slowly. Inside shines a pair of drop-earrings: each have four diamonds, one at the base, then a gap, then three perfectly spaced diamonds hanging one after the other. They're beautiful, simple, and classic. What I would choose myself, if I were ever given the opportunity to shop at Cartier.

"They're lovely," I whisper, and because they are second chance earrings, I love them. "Thank you."

I can feel the tension leave his body. He kisses my shoulder again.

"I'll let you get ready," he breathes, and he heads out the door without a backward glance.

I have entered an alternative universe. The young woman staring back at me looks worthy of a red carpet. Her strapless, emerald-green, floor-length chiffon gown is simply stunning. Maybe I'll write to Caroline Acton myself. It's fitted and seems to flatter what little I have of curves. My hair falls in soft waves around my face, spilling over my shoulders to my breasts. I tuck one side behind my ear, revealing my second-chance earrings. I have kept my make-up to a minimum, a natural look: eyeliner, mascara, a little pink blusher, and pale pink lipstick. I don't really need the blusher, I am slightly flushed from the constant movement of the silver balls. Yes, they'll guarantee I have some color in my cheeks tonight. Shaking my head at the audacity of Edward's erotic ideas, I lean down to collect my chiffon wrap and silver clutch purse and go in search of my Fifty Shades.

He is talking to Taylor and three other men in the hallway, his back to me. Their surprised, appreciative expressions alert Edward to my presence. He turns as I stand awkwardly waiting. Holy crow, my mouth dries. He looks stunning, freaking hot. Black dinner suit, black tie, and his expression, as he gazes at me, is one of awe.

He comes toward me and kisses my hair.

"Isabella… You look breathtaking."

I flush at this compliment in front of Taylor and the other guys.

"A glass of champagne before we go?"

"Please," I murmur, far too quickly.

Edward nods to Taylor who heads out with his three cohorts into the foyer. In the great room, Edward retrieves a bottle of champagne from the fridge.

"Security team?" I ask.

"Close protection. They're under Taylor's control. He's trained in that, too."

Edward hands me a champagne flute.

"He's very versatile."

"Yes, he is." Edward smiles down at me. "You look lovely, Isabella. Cheers." He raises his glass, and I clink it with mine. The champagne is a pale rose color. It tastes deliciously crisp and light.

"How are you feeling?" he asks quietly.

“Fine, thank you.” I smile sweetly, giving nothing away, knowing full well he’s referring to the silver balls.

He smirks at me.

“I want to show you something.” Holding out his hand, he leads me back out to a door beside the stairs. He opens it and leads me into a large room, roughly the same size as his playroom, which must be directly above us. This one is filled with books. A library, every wall crammed floor to ceiling… wow. In the center is a full-sized billiard table, illuminated by a long triangular-prism shaped Tiffany lamp.

“You have a library!” I squeak in awe, overwhelmed with excitement.

“Yes, or the balls room, as Emmett calls it. The apartment is quite spacious. I realized today, when you mentioned exploring, that I’ve never given you a tour. We don’t have time now, but I thought I’d show you this room, and maybe challenge you to a game of billiards, in the not-too-distant future.”

I grin at him. “Bring it on.” And secretly hug myself with glee. Jake and I have been playing pool for years. I am ace with a cue. Jake has been a good teacher.

“What?” Edward asks, amused. *Oh!* I really must stop expressing every emotion I feel the instant I feel it, I scold myself.

“Nothing,” I say quickly.

Edward narrows his eyes.

“Well, maybe Doctor Banner can uncover your secrets. You’ll meet him this evening.”

“The expensive charlatan?” Holy crow.

“The very same. He’s dying to meet you."

Chapter 63

Edward takes my hand and gently skims his thumb across my knuckles as we sit in the back of the Mercedes heading north. I squirm slightly, the sensation felt in my groin**.** I resist the urge to moan, as Taylor is in the front, not wearing his iPod, with one of the security guys, whose name I think is Stuart. I am beginning to feel a dull, pleasurable ache, deep in my belly, caused by the balls, and I idly wonder how long will I be able to manage, without some um… relief? I cross my legs. As I do, something that's been niggling me in the back of my mind suddenly surfaces.

"Where did you get the lipstick?" I ask Edward quietly.

He smirks at me and points in front. "Taylor," he mouths.

I burst out laughing. "Oh." And stop quickly – the balls. I bite my lip. Edward smiles at me, his eyes gleaming wickedly. He knows exactly what he's doing, sexy beast that he is.

"Relax," he breathes. "If it gets too much…" his voice trails off and he gently kisses each knuckle in turn and then gently sucking the tip of my little finger. Now I know he's doing this on purpose. I close my eyes as the synaptic impulses send dark desire coursing through my body. I surrender briefly to the sensation, my muscles clenching deep inside me. *Oh…my.* When I open my eyes again Edward is regarding me closely. A dark prince. It must be the dinner jacket and bowtie, but he looks older, sophisticated; a devastatingly handsome roué with licentious intent. He simply takes my breath away. I am completely in his sexual thrall, and if I am to believe him, he's in mine. The thought brings a smile to my face, and his answering grin is dazzling.

"So what can we expect at this event?"

"Oh, the usual stuff," Edward says breezily.

"Not usual for me," I murmur.

Edward smiles fondly and kisses my hand again.

"Lots of people flashing their cash. Auction, raffle, dinner, dancing. My mother knows how to throw a party. Oh, and you'll need this."

Reaching into the bag at his feet, he pulls out a black masquerade mask with a small fascinator feather effect at the side.

"It's a masked ball," he says matter-of-factly.

"Oh…" The mask is beautiful, soft shining velvet.

I grin at him.

"Are you wearing one?"

"Of course. They're very liberating in a way," he adds, raising an eyebrow, and he smirks.

Oh, this is going to be fun.

There is a line of expensive cars heading up the driveway of the Cullen mansion. From a distance I can see long, pale pink paper lanterns hanging over the drive, and as we inch closer, they are everywhere. In the early evening light they look magical. We are entering an enchanted kingdom. How suitable for my prince. A childish excitement overwhelms me, eclipsing all other feelings.

"Masks on." Edward grins and as he dons his simple black mask, my prince becomes something darker, more sensual. All I can see of his face is his beautiful chiseled mouth and strong jaw. *Holy fuck. M*y already aching belly aches some more. I fasten mine, grinning at him, ignoring the hunger deep in my body.

Taylor pulls into the driveway and a valet opens Edward's door. Stuart leaps out to open mine.

"Ready?" Edward asks.

"As I'll ever be."

"You look beautiful, Isabella." He kisses my hand and exits the car.

A dark green carpet has been laid along the lawn to one side of the house, leading around to the impressive grounds at the rear. Edward has a protective arm around me, resting his hand on my waist, as we follow a steady stream of Seattle's elite, dressed in their finery and wearing all manner of masks, along the green carpet, pale pink lanterns lighting the way. Two photographers marshal guests to pose for pictures against the backdrop of an ivy-strewn arbor.

"Mr. Cullen!" one of the photographers calls. Edward nods in acknowledgement and pulls me close as we pose quickly for a snap. How do they know it's him? His trademark hair, surely.

"Two photographers?" I ask Edward.

"One is from the Seattle Times, the other is for a souvenir. We'll be able to buy a copy later."

Oh… my picture in the press again. Lauren briefly enters my mind. This is how she found me, posing with Edward. The thought is unsettling, though it's comforting that I am unrecognizable beneath my mask. At the end of the line white-suited waiters and waitresses hold trays of glasses brimming with champagne, and I'm grateful when Edward passes me a glass, effectively distracting me from my dark thoughts.

We approach a large white pergola hung with smaller versions of the paper lanterns. Beneath it shines a black and white checkered dance floor, surrounded by a low fence with entrances on three sides. At each entrance stand two elaborate ice sculptures of swans. The fourth side of the pergola is occupied by a stage where a string quartet is playing softly, a haunting ethereal piece I don't recognize. The stage looks set for a big band, for later, presumably, as there's no sign of the musicians yet. Taking my hand, Edward leads me between swans onto the dance floor where the other guests are congregating, chatting over glasses of champagne.

Toward the shoreline stands an enormous tent, open on the side nearest to us, so I can glimpse the formally arranged tables and chairs. So many!

"How many people are coming?" I ask Edward, slightly thrown by the scale of the tent.

"I think about three hundred. You'll have to ask my mother." He smiles down at me, and maybe it's because I can only see his smile. Wow… my inner goddess swoons.

"Edward!"

A young woman appears out of the throng and throws her arms around his neck, and immediately I know it's Alice. She's dressed in a sleek, pale pink, full-length satin gown with a stunning, delicately detailed Venetian mask to match. She looks amazing. And in this one moment, I have never felt so grateful for the dress Edward has given me.

"Bella! Oh darling, you look gorgeous!" She gives me a quick hug. "You must come and meet my friends. None of them can believe that Edward finally has a girlfriend." I shoot a quick panicked glance at Edward, who shrugs in a resigned I-know-she's-impossible-I-had-to-live-with-her-for-years way, and let Alice lead me over to a group of four young women, all expensively attired and impeccably groomed.

Alice makes hasty introductions. Three of them are sweet and kind, but Jane, I think her name is, regards me sourly from beneath her red mask.

"Of course, we all thought Edward was gay," she says snidely, concealing her rancor with a large, fake smile.

Alice pouts at her.

“Jane, behave yourself. It’s obvious he has excellent taste in women. He was waiting for the right one to come along… and it wasn’t you!”

Jane flushes, as do I. Could this be any more uncomfortable?

“Ladies, if I could claim my date back, please.” Snaking his arm around my waist, Edward pulls me to his side. All four women flush, grin, and fidget, his dazzling smile doing what it always does. Alice glances at me and rolls her eyes, and I have to laugh.

“Lovely to meet you,” I say as he drags me away.

“Thank you,” I mouth at Edward when we’re some distance away.

“I saw that Jane was with Alice. She is one nasty piece of work.”

“She likes you,” I mutter dryly.

He shudders. “Well, the feeling is not mutual. Come, let me introduce to some people.”

I spend the next half hour in a whirlwind of introductions. I meet two Hollywood actors… holy shit. But there is no way I am going to remember everyone else’s name. Edward keeps me close at his side, and I’m grateful. Frankly, I am intimidated by the wealth, the glamour, and the sheer lavish scale of it all. I have never been to anything like this in my life.

The white-suited waiters move effortlessly through the growing crowd of guests with bottles of champagne, topping up my glass with worrying regularity. No, I must not drink too much. I am beginning to feel light-headed, and I don’t know if it’s the champagne, the charged atmosphere of mystery and excitement created by the masks, or the secret silver balls. The dull ache in my belly is becoming impossible to ignore.

“So you work at SIP?” a balding portly gentleman in a half-bear – or is it a dog mask? – asks. “Heard rumors of a hostile takeover.”

I flush. Hostile takeover from a man who has more money than sense and is a stalker par excellence.

“I’m just an intern, Mr. Eccles. I wouldn’t know about these things.”

Edward says nothing and smiles blandly at Eccles.

“Ladies and Gentlemen!” We are interrupted by the master-of-ceremonies, wearing an impressive black and white harlequin mask. “Please take your seats. Dinner is served.”

Edward takes my hand and we follow the crowd towards the large tent.

The interior is stunning. Three enormous shallow chandeliers throw rainbow-colored sparkles over the ivory silk lining of the ceiling and walls. There must be at least thirty tables, and they remind me of the private dining room at the Heathman. Crystal glasses, crisp white linen, covering the tables and chairs, and in the center an exquisite display of pale pink peonies, gathered around a silver candelabra. Beside it, wrapped in silk, is a basket of goodies.

Edward consults the seating plan and leads me to a table in the center. Alice and Esme are already in situ, deep in conversation with a young man I don't know. Esme's in a shimmering silver gown with a silver and lace Venetian mask to match. She looks radiant, not stressed at all, and she greets me warmly.

"Bella, how lovely to see you again! And looking so beautiful, too."

"Mother," Edward greets her stiffly and kisses her on both cheeks.

"Oh, Edward, so formal!" she scolds him teasingly.

We are joined on our table by Esme's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Platt, who seem exuberant and youthful, though it's difficult to tell beneath their matching bronze masks. They are delighted to see Edward.

"Grandmother, Grandfather, may I introduce Isabella Swan?"

Mrs. Platt is all over me like a rash.

"Oh, he's finally found someone. How wonderful. And so pretty! Well, I do hope you make an honest man of him." She shakes my hand enthusiastically.

Holy crow. I thank the heavens for my mask.

"Mother, don't embarrass Bella." Esme comes to my rescue.

"Ignore the silly old coot m'dear," Mr. Platt shakes my hand. "She thinks because she's so old, she has a God-given right to say whatever nonsense pops into that woolly head of hers."

"Bella, this is my date, Harry." Alice shyly introduces her young man. He gives me a wicked grin and his blue eyes dance with amusement as we shake hands.

"Pleased to meet you, Harry," I murmur.

Edward shakes Harry's hand. I can tell he's sizing him up. Don't tell me that poor Alice suffers from her overbearing brother, too. I smile at Alice in sympathy.

Old friends of Esme's called Peter and Charlotte are the last couple at our table, but there is still no sign of Dr. Cullen.

Then suddenly there's the hiss of a microphone, and Dr. Cullen's voice booms over the PA system, causing the babble of voices to die down. Carlisle stands on a small stage at one end of the tent, wearing an impressive gold Punchinello mask.

"Welcome, ladies and gentleman, to our annual charity ball. I hope that you enjoy what we have laid on for you tonight and that you'll dig deep into your pockets to support the fantastic work that our team does with Coping Together. As you know, it's a cause that is very close to my wife's heart and mine."

I peek nervously at Edward, who is staring impassively, I think, towards the stage. He glances at me, and smirks.

"I'll hand you over now to our Master of Ceremonies. Please be seated, and enjoy," Carlisle finishes.

Polite applause follows, then the babble in the tent starts again. I am seated between Edward and his grandfather. I admire the small white place card with fine silver calligraphy that bears my name as a waiter lights the candelabra with a long taper. Carlisle joins us, kissing me on both cheeks, surprising me.

"Lovely to see you again, Bella," he murmurs. He really looks very striking in his extraordinary gold mask.

"Ladies and gentlemen, please nominate a table head," the MC calls out.

"Oh – me, me!" says Alice immediately, bouncing enthusiastically in her seat.

"In the center of the table you will find an envelope," the MC continues. "Would everyone find, beg, borrow, or steal a bill of the highest denomination you can manage, write your name on it, and place it inside the envelope. Table heads, please guard these envelopes carefully. We will need them later."

Holy crap. I haven't bought any money with me. How stupid… to a charity event!

Fishing out his wallet, Edward produces two hundred dollar bills.

"Here," he says.

What!?

“I’ll pay you back,” I whisper.

His mouth twists slightly, and I know he’s not happy, but he doesn’t comment. I sign my name using his fountain pen. It’s black, with a white flower motif on the cap, and Alice passes the envelope around.

In front of me I find another card inscribed with silver calligraphy – our menu.

****

A Masked Ball in aid of Coping Together

Menu

Salmon Tartare with Crème Fraiche and Cucumber on Toasted Brioche
Alban Estate Rousanne 2006

Roasted Muscovy Duck Breast Creamy Sunchoke Purée, Thyme Roasted Bing Cherries, Foie Gras
Châteauneuf-du-Pape Vieilles Vignes 2006 Domaine de la Janasse

Sugared Crusted Walnut Chiffon Candied Figs, Sabayon, Maple Ice Cream
Vin de Constance 2004 Klein Constantia

Selection of local Cheeses and Breads
Alban Estate Grenache 2006

Coffee and Petit Fours

****

Well, that accounts for the number of crystal glasses in every size that crowd my place setting. Our waiter is back, offering wine and water. Behind me, the sides of the tent through which we entered are being closed, while at the front, two waiters pull back the canvas, revealing the sunset over Seattle and Meydenbaur Bay. It’s an absolutely breathtaking view, the twinkling lights of Seattle in the distance and the orange, dusky calm of the bay reflecting the opal sky. Wow. It's so calm and peaceful.

Ten waiters, each holding a plate, come to stand between us. On a silent cue, they serve us our starters, in complete synchronization, then vanish again. The salmon looks delicious and I realize I am famished.

“Hungry?” Edward breathes softly so only I can hear.

And I know he’s not referring to the food, and the muscles deep in my belly respond.

“Very,” I whisper, boldly meeting his gaze, and Edward’s mouth pops open very slightly.

Ha! See, two can play at this game.

Edward’s grandfather engages me in conversation immediately. He’s a wonderful old man, so proud of his daughter and the three children. Weird to think of Edward as a child. The memory of his burn scars come unbidden to my mind, but I quickly quash it. I don’t want to think about that now, though ironically, it’s the reason behind this party. I wish Rose was here with Emmett. She would fit in so well here. She wouldn’t be daunted by the sheer number of forks and knives laid out before her, she could command the table. I imagine her duking it out with Alice over who should be table head. The thought makes me smile.

The conversation at the table ebbs and flows. Alice is entertaining, as usual, and quite eclipses poor Harry, who mostly stays quiet… like me. Edward’s grandmother is the most vocal. She too has a biting sense of humor, usually at the expense of her husband. I begin to feel a little sorry for Mr. Platt.

Edward and Peter talk animatedly about a device Edward’s company is developing, inspired by Schumacher’s principles of small is beautiful. It’s hard to keep up. Edward seems intent on empowering impoverished communities all over the world with wind-up technology – devices that need no electricity or batteries and minimal maintenance.

Watching him in full flow is astonishing. He’s passionate and committed to improving the lives of the less fortunate. Through his telecommunications company, he’s intent on being first to market with a wind-up mobile phone. Holy crow. I had no idea. I mean, I knew about the food thing, but this… Peter seems unable to comprehend Edward’s plan to give the technology away and not patent it. I wonder vaguely how Edward made all his money if he's so keen to give stuff away.

Throughout dinner, a steady stream of men in smartly tailored dinner jackets and the most bizarre masks stop by the table, keen to meet Edward, shake his hand and exchange pleasantries. He introduces me to some, but not others. I'm intrigued to know how and why he makes the distinction.

During one such conversation, Alice leans across and smiles.

“Bella, will you help in the auction?”

“Of course,” I respond, only too willing.

By the time dessert is served, night has fallen and I'm really uncomfortable. I really need to get rid of the balls. Before I can excuse myself, the Master of Ceremonies appears at our table, and with him – if I'm not mistaken – is Miss European Pigtails. What's her name? Hansel, Gretel... Heidi. She's masked of course, but I know it's her when her gaze doesn't move beyond Edward. I can see her blush and am beyond pleased that Edward doesn't acknowledge her at all.

The MC asks for our envelope, and with a very practiced and eloquent flourish, asks Esme to pull out the winning bill. It's Harry's, and the silk-wrapped basket is awarded to him.

I applaud politely, but I'm finding it impossible to concentrate any more of the proceedings.

"If you'll excuse me," I murmur to Edward.

He looks at me intently.

"Do you need the powder room?"

I nod.

"I'll show you," he says darkly.

When I stand, all the other men around the table stand with me. Oh, such manners.

"No, Edward! You're not taking Bella. I will."

Alice is on her feet before Edward can protest. His jaw tenses. I can tell he's not pleased. Quite frankly, neither am I. I have...err needs. I shrug apologetically at him, and he sits down quickly, resigned.

On our return I feel a little better, though the relief of removing the balls was not as instantaneous as I hoped. They're now stashed safely in my clutch. Why did I think I could last the whole evening? I'm still yearning. Perhaps I can persuade Edward to take me to the boathouse later. I flush at the thought, and glance at him as I take my seat. He stares at me, the ghost of a smile crossing his lips. Phew, he's no longer mad at a missed opportunity, though maybe I am. I feel frustrated, irritable even. Edward squeezes my hand, and we both listen attentively to Carlisle, who is back on stage talking about Coping Together. Edward passes me another card – a list of the auction prizes. I scan them quickly:

Auction Gifts And Gracious Donors

Signed Baseball Bat from the Mariners – Dr. EA Spurger

Gucci Purse, Wallet & Keyring – Dante Nordstrum

One Day Voucher for Two at Seattle Tranquility Spa – Mrs. Ruby Tranquillo

Coco De Mer Coffret & Perfume Beauty Selection – Elizabeth Texas

Venetian Mirror – Mr. and Mrs. KM Squalls

Two Cases of wine of your choice from Alban Estates – Alban Estates

2 VIP Tickets for XTY in Concert – Mr. BJR Yesyov

Race Day at Daytona – EMC Britt Inc

Pride & Prejudice by Jane Austen First Edition –Dr. AF Lace-Field

Drive an Aston Martin DB7 for a day – Mr. and Mrs. LW Norad

Oil Painting, 'Into the Blue' by J Trouton – Kirk Trouton

Gliding Lesson – Seattle Soarers Club

Weekend Break for Two at the Heathman, Portland – The Heathman

One weekend stay in Aspen, Colorado (Sleeps 6) – Mr. E Cullen

One Week Stay Aboard the SusieCue Yacht (6 berths) Moored in St Lucia – Dr. & Mrs. Larin

One Week at Isle Ariana, Brazil (sleeps 8) – Dr. & Mrs. Cullen

Holy shit. I blink up at Edward.

"You own property in Aspen?" I hiss at him. The auction is under way, and I have to keep my voice down.

He nods, surprised at my outburst and slightly irritated, and puts his finger to his lips to silence me.

"Do you have property elsewhere?" I whisper.

He nods again and cocks his head to one side in a warning.

The whole room erupts with cheering and applause. One of the prizes has gone for ten thousand dollars.

“I’ll tell you later,” Edward says quietly. "I wanted to come with you," he adds, rather sulkily.

And I realize that I am still querulous. The frustrating effect of the balls, no doubt. I sit and stew, applauding when necessary, as each lot is sold – for astonishing amounts of money.

The bidding moves to Edward’s place in Aspen and reaches twenty thousand dollars.

“Going once, going twice…” the MC calls.

And I don’t know what possesses me, but I suddenly, clearly, hear my own voice ringing out over the throng.

“Twenty-four thousand dollars!”

Every mask at the table turns to me in shocked amazement, the biggest reaction of all coming from beside me. I can hear his sharp intake of breath and feel his wrath washing over me like a tidal wave.

“Twenty-four thousand dollars, to the lovely lady in green, going once, going twice…. Sold!”

Chapter 64

Holy shit… did I really just do that? It must be the alcohol. I've had a lot of champagne, plus four different glasses of four different wines. Oh, shit. I glance up at Edward who's busy applauding. Oh fuck. He's going to be so angry, and we'd been getting on so well. My subconscious has finally decided to make an appearance, and she's wearing her Edvard Munch Scream face.

Edward leans over to me, a large, fake smile plastered across his face. He kisses my cheek, then moves closer to whisper in my ear, in a very cold, controlled voice.

"I don't know whether to worship at your feet, or spank the living shit out of you."

Oh, I know what I want right now.

I gaze up at him, blinking through my mask. I just wish I could see his eyes.

"I'll take option two, please," I whisper frantically as the applause dies down.

His lips part as he inhales sharply. Oh, that chiseled mouth. I want it on me, now. I ache for him. And then he gives me a dazzling smile, and it's not fake, it's sincere. *Holy crow.*

"Suffering, are you? We'll have to see what we can do about that," he murmurs as he runs his fingers along my jaw line. I feel his touch deep, deep in my belly, where that ache has spawned and grown. I want to jump him right here, but we sit back to watch the auction of the next lot.

I can barely sit still. Edward drapes an arm around my shoulders and with his free hand clasps mine, bringing it to his lips, then letting it rest on his lap. Slowly and surreptitiously, so I don't realize his game until it's too late, he eases my hand up against his erection. I gasp, and my eyes dart in panic around the table, but all eyes are fixed on the stage. So I take advantage, slowly caressing him, letting my fingers explore. Edward keeps his hand over mine, his other hand gently squeezing my shoulder. His mouth opens slightly, and it's the only reaction I can see to my inexpert touch. But it means so much. He wants me. All my muscles in my belly contract. This is becoming unbearable.

A week on the Isle Adriana is the final lot for auction – of course Dr and Mrs Cullen have an Island – and the bidding escalates rapidly, but I am barely aware of it. I can feel him growing beneath my fingers, and it makes me feel so powerful.

"Sold, for $110,000!" the MC declares victoriously. The whole room bursts into applause and reluctantly I follow, as does Edward, ruining our fun.

He turns to me and his lips twitch.

“Ready?” he mouths over the rapturous cheering.

“Yes,” I mouth back

“Bella!” Alice calls. “It’s time!”

What? No… not again!

“Time for what?”

“The First Dance Auction. Come on!”

She stands and holds out her hand. I glance at Edward who is, I think, glowering at Alice, and I don’t know whether to laugh or cry, but in this moment, it’s laughter that wins. A real cathartic bubble of schoolgirl giggles escapes me. Thwarted again by the pink powerhouse that is Alice Cullen. Edward peers at me and after a beat, I can see the ghost of a smile on his lips.

“The first dance will be with me, okay? And it won’t be on the dance floor,” he murmurs threateningly. My giggles subside as anticipation licks my aching belly. *Oh, yes!* My inner goddess performs a perfect triple salko on the beam.

“I look forward to it,” I murmur, leaning over and planting a soft, chaste kiss on his mouth. Glancing around, I realize that our fellow guests at the table are astonished. Of course… they’ve never seen Edward with a woman before.

He smiles up at me. And he looks… *happy*. Wow.

“Come on, Bella,” Alice nags. Taking her outstretched hand, I follow her onto the stage where ten more young women have assembled, and I note with vague unease that Jane is one of them.

“Gentlemen – the highlight of the evening!” The MC booms over the babble of voices. “The moment you’ve all been waiting for! These twelve lovely ladies have all agreed to auction their first dance to the highest bidder!”

Oh no. I blush from head to toe. I hadn’t realized what this meant. How… humiliating!

“It’s for a good cause,” Alice hisses at me, sensing my discomfort. “Besides, Edward will win.” She rolls her eyes. “I can’t imagine him letting anyone outbid him. He hasn’t taken his eyes off you all evening.”

Yes, focus on the good cause, and Edward is bound to win. I can't think of anyone richer than him. But it means spending more money on you! my subconscious snarls at me. But I don't want to dance with anyone else. I can't dance with anyone else. And it's not spending money on me, he's donating it to the charity. Although he's already twenty-four thousand dollars down. I never thought of that money as mine. But I seem to have gotten away with my impulsive bid.

"Now Gentlemen, pray gather around, and take a good look at what could be yours for the first dance. Twelve comely and compliant wenches."

Jeez! I feel like I'm in a meat market. I watch, horrified, as at least thirty men make their way to the stage area, Edward included, moving with easy grace between the tables, pausing to say a few hellos on the way. Once the bidders are assembled the MC begins.

"Ladies and gentlemen, in the tradition of the masquerade we shall maintain the mystery behind the masks, and stick to first names or simple initials. First up we have the lovely Rose A."

Rose A is giggling like a schoolgirl, too. Maybe I won't be so out of place. She's dressed head to foot in navy taffeta with matching mask. Two young men step forward expectantly. Lucky Rose A.

"Rose A speaks fluent Japanese, is a qualified fighter pilot, and an Olympic gymnast. Hmmm," the MC winks. "Gentleman, what am I bid?"

Rose A gapes astounded at the MC. Obviously, he's talking complete garbage. She grins shyly back at the two contenders.

"A thousand bucks!" one calls.

Very quickly the bidding escalates to five thousand dollars.

"Going once – going twice – sold!" the MC declares loudly, "to the gentleman in the mask!" And of course all the men are wearing masks… hoots of laughter, applause and cheering. Rose A beams at her purchaser and quickly exits the stage.

"See? This is fun!" whispers Alice. "I hope Edward does win you. We don't want a brawl," she adds.

"Brawl?" I answer horrified.

"Oh yes. He was really hot-headed when he was younger." She shudders.

Edward *brawling?* Refined, sophisticated, likes-Tudor-choral-music Edward? I can't see it.

The MC distracts me with his next introduction – a young woman in red, with long jet-black hair.

"Gentlemen, may I present the wonderful Tami G! Tami is an experienced matador, plays the cello to concert standard, and she's a champion pole-vaulter. How about that, gentlemen? What am I bid, please, for a dance with the delightful Tami G?"

Tammy G glares at the MC and someone yells, very loudly.

"Three thousand dollars!" It's a masked man with blonde hair and beard.

He's counter-bid once, but Tami G sells for four thousand dollars.

Edward is watching me like a hawk. *Brawler Cullen*.

"How long ago?" I ask Alice.

She glances at me, nonplussed.

"How long ago was Edward brawling?"

"Oh! Early teens. Drove my parents crazy, coming home with cut lips and black eyes. He was expelled from two schools. He inflicted so much damage on his opponents."

I gape at her.

"Hasn't he told you?" She sighs. "He got quite a bad rep among my friends. Was really persona non-grata for a few years. But it stopped when he was about fifteen or sixteen." She shrugs.

Holy fuck. Another piece of the jigsaw slots into place.

"So, what am I bid for the gorgeous PBJ?"

"Four thousand dollars," a deep voice calls from the left side. PBJ squeals in delight.

I stop paying attention to the auction. So Edward was in that kind of trouble at school… fighting. I wonder why. I stare at him. He's watching us closely.

"And now, allow me to introduce the beautiful Bella S." Oh shit, that's me. I glance nervously at Alice and she shoos me to center stage. Fortunately I don't fall over, but stand, embarrassed as hell, on show for everyone. When I look at Edward he's smirking at me. The bastard.

“Beautiful Bella plays six musical instruments, speaks fluent Mandarin and is keen on Yoga. Well, gentlemen –” Before he can even finish his sentence, Edward cuts in, glaring at the MC through his mask.

“Ten thousand dollars.” I hear Jane’s gasp of disbelief behind me.

Oh fuck.

“Fifteen.”

What? All turn as one to a tall, impeccably dressed man standing to the left of the stage. I blink at Fifty. Shit, what will he make of this? But he’s scratching his chin, and giving the stranger an ironic smile. It’s obvious Edward knows him. The stranger nods in polite acknowledgement at Edward.

“Well, gentlemen! We have high rollers in the house this evening.” I can feel the MCs excitement emanating through his harlequin mask as he turns to beam at Edward. This is a great show, but it’s at my expense! I want to wail.

“Twenty,” counters Edward quietly.

The babble of the crowd has died. Everyone is staring at me – Edward and Mr. Mysterious by the stage.

“Twenty-five,” the stranger says.

Could this be any more embarrassing?

Edward stares at him impassively, but he’s amused. All eyes are on Edward. What’s he going to do? My heart is in my mouth. I feel sick.

“One hundred thousand dollars,” he says softly.

What the *fuck!* Jane hisses audibly behind me, and a general gasp of dismay and amusement ripples through the crowd. The stranger holds his hands up in defeat, laughing, and Edward smirks at him. From the corner of my eye, I can see Alice bouncing up and down with glee. My subconscious is gazing at Edward, utterly gobsmacked.

“One hundred thousand dollars for the lovely Bella! Going once… going twice –" The MC stares at the stranger, who shakes his head with mock regret, and bows chivalrously.

“Sold!” the MC cries out triumphantly.

In a deafening round of applause and cheering, Edward steps forward to take my hand and help me from the stage. He gazes at me with an amused grin as I make my way down, kisses the back of my hand, then tucks it into the crook of his arm and leads me towards the marquee's exit.

"Who was that?" I ask.

He gazes down at me.

"Someone you can meet later. Right now I want to show you something. We have about thirty minutes tops until the First Dance auction finishes. Then we have to be back on the dance floor so that I can enjoy that dance I've paid for."

"A very expensive dance," I mutter disapprovingly.

"I'm sure it'll be worth every single cent," he says smiling down at me wickedly. Oh, he has a glorious smile, and the ache is back, blossoming in my belly.

We're out on the lawn. I thought we would be heading to the boat house, but disappointingly, we seem to be heading for the dance floor where the big band is now setting up. Heavens, at least twenty musicians… Wow! A few guests are still milling about, furtively smoking, but since most of the action is back in the tent, we don't attract too much attention. Edward leads me to the rear of the house and opens a French window leading into a large comfortable sitting room that I've not seen before. He walks me through the deserted hall towards the sweeping staircase with its elegant, highly polished wooden balustrade. Taking my hand from the crook of his arm, he leads me up to the first floor, and on, up a further flight of stairs to the second. Opening a white door he ushers me into one of the bedrooms.

"This was my room," he says quietly, standing by the door and locking it behind him. It's large, stark, and sparsely furnished. The walls are white, as is the furniture; a spacious double bed, a desk and chair, shelves crammed with books and lined with various trophies, for kick-boxing by the look of them. The walls are hung with movie posters – The Matrix, Fight Club, The Truman Show, and two framed posters featuring kick boxers, one called Guiseppe DeNatale –I've never heard of him. But what catches my eye is the white pin board above the desk, studded with a myriad of photographs, Mariners pennants, and ticket stubs. A slice of young Edward. My eyes come back to the magnificent, beautiful man, now standing in the center of the room. He looks at me darkly, brooding and sexy.

"I've never brought a girl in here," he murmurs.

"Never?" I whisper.

He shakes his head.

I swallow convulsively, and the ache that has been bothering me for the last couple of hours is roaring now, raw and wanting. Seeing him standing there, on the royal blue carpet, in that mask… it's beyond erotic. I want him. Now. Any way I can get him. I have to resist launching myself at him and ripping his clothes off.

He waltzes over to me slowly.

"We don't have long Isabella, and the way I'm feeling right this moment… we won't need long. Turn around. Let me get you out of that dress."

I turn and stare at the door, grateful that he's locked it. Bending down, he whispers softly in my ear.

"Keep the mask on."

I groan, and he's not even touched me yet. He grasps the top of my dress, his fingers sliding against my skin, and the touch reverberates through my body. In one swift move he opens the zipper. Holding my dress, he helps me to step out of it, then turns, moves to the chair and drapes my dress artfully over the back. Removing his jacket, he drapes it too over the back of the chair. He pauses, and stares at me for a moment, drinking me in. I'm in the basque and matching panties. I enjoy his sensuous gaze.

"You know, Isabella," he says softly as he walks back towards me, undoing his bowtie so it hangs from either side of his neck. He carries on, undoing the top three buttons of his shirt. "I was so mad when you bought my auction lot. All manner of ideas ran through my head. I had to remind myself that punishment is off the menu, but then you volunteered." He gazes down at me through his mask. "Why did you do that, Isabella?"

"I don't know. Frustration, too much alcohol, worthy cause," I whisper meekly, shrugging apologetically. Maybe to get his attention. I needed him then. I need him more now. The ache is worse, and I know he can soothe it, calm this roaring, salivating beast in me, with the beast in him.

His mouth presses into a line and he slowly licks his upper lip. I want that tongue on me.

"I vowed to myself I would not spank you again, even if you begged me."

"Please," I beg.

"But then I realized, you're probably very uncomfortable at the moment, and it's not something you're used to." He smirks at me knowingly – arrogant bastard – but I don't care, because he's absolutely right.

"Yes," I breathe.

"So, there might be a certain… latitude. If I do this, you must promise me one thing."

"Anything."

"You will safe word if you need to, and I will just make love to you, okay?"

"Yes," I breathe. I want his hands on me.

He swallows, then takes my hand and moves towards the bed. Throwing the duvet aside he sits down, grabs a pillow and places it beside him. He gazes up at me, standing beside him, and suddenly tugs hard on my hand so that I fall across his lap. He shifts slightly so my body is resting on the bed, my chest on the pillow, my face to one side. Leaning over, he sweeps all my hair out of my face and tucks it over my shoulder.

"Put your hands behind your back," he murmurs.

Oh? Sliding his bowtie off he quickly binds my hands so they are tied behind me, resting in the small of my back.

"You really want this, Isabella?" he breathes.

I close my eyes. This is the first time since I met him that I really want this, need it.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Why?" he asks softly as he caresses my behind with his palm.

I groan as soon as his hand makes contact with my skin. *I don't know why*. You tell me not to over-think. After a day like today, arguing about twenty-four thousand dollars, Lauren, Mrs. Robinson, the roadmap, this lavish party, the masks, the alcohol, the silver balls, the auction… *I want this.*

"Do I need a reason?"

"No, baby, you don't," he says. "I'm just trying to understand you." His left hand curls around my waist, holding me in place, as his palm leaves my behind and lands hard, just above the junction of my thighs. The pain connects directly with the ache in my belly. Oh man. I moan loudly. He hits me again, in exactly the same place. I groan again.

"Two," he murmurs. "We'll go with twelve."

Oh…my! This feels different to the last time. So carnal, so… necessary. He caresses my behind with his long-fingered hands, and I feel so helpless, trussed up and pressed into the mattress, of my own free will. He hits me again, slightly to the side, and again, to the other

side, then pauses, as he slowly peels my panties down and off. He gently trails his palm across my behind again, before continuing my spanking, each stinging smack taking the edge off my need. Or fuelling it – I don't know. I just surrender myself to the rhythm of blows, savoring the moment.

"Twelve," he murmurs breathlessly, and caresses my behind again. Very slowly, he trails his fingers down and towards my sex, and he slowly slides two fingers inside me, moving them in a wide circle.

I groan loudly, and I come… and come, convulsing around his fingers. It's so intense. Unexpected. Quick.

"That's right baby," he murmurs appreciatively.

He quickly releases my wrists, keeping his fingers inside me as I lie panting and spent over him.

"I've not finished with you yet, Isabella," he says, and slowly shifts, not removing his fingers at all, easing my knees on to the floor so that now I'm leaning over the bed. He kneels on the floor behind me, and I can hear him tear a foil pack with his teeth and undo his zipper. He eases his fingers out of me and replaces them with his erection, pushing relentlessly into me.

"This is going to be quick, baby," he murmurs and grabbing my hips he thrusts into me. Oh, and it's heavenly. Hitting the bellyache square on, again and again, erasing it. The feeling is mind-blowing… just what I need. And I push back to meet him... thrust for thrust.

"Bella, no," he grunts, trying to still me. But I want him too much and I repeat my actions.

"Bella, shit…" he mutters and then groans loudly as he comes and the tortured sound sets me off again spiraling into a healing orgasm, that wrings me out and rids me of the bellyache, replacing all with a soothing, assuaging serenity. Edward bends and kisses my shoulder, then pulls out of me. Placing his arms around me, he rests his head in the middle of my back, and we lie like this, both kneeling at the bedside, for… what…? Seconds…. minutes, as our breathing regulates. Edward stirs and kisses my back.

"I believe you owe me a dance Miss Swan," he murmurs.

"Hmm," I respond, reveling in the absence of bellyache, basking in the afterglow.

He sits back on his heels and pulls me off the bed onto his lap.

"We don't have long. Come on." He kisses my hair and forces me to stand. I grumble slightly but sit back down on the bed and collect my panties from the floor, scooping them

on, then lazily walk to the chair to retrieve my dress. I note with dispassionate interest that I did not remove my shoes during our illicit tryst. Edward is tying his bowtie, having finished straightening the bed. As I slip my dress back on, I check out the photographs on the pin board: Edward as a sullen teen, gorgeous even then – with Emmett and Alice on the ski slopes – on his own in Paris – The Arc de Triomphe serving as a giveaway background – in London, New York, The Grand Canyon, Sydney Opera House… even the Great Wall of China. Master Cullen was well traveled at a young age. Ticket stubs to various concerts: U2, Metallica, The Verve, Sheryl Crow, the New York Philharmonic performing Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet – what an eclectic mix! And in the corner, a very small picture of a young woman. It's in black and white. She looks familiar, but for the life of me I can't place her. Not Mrs. Robinson… thank the lord.

"Who's this?" I ask as I do up my dress.

"No one of consequence," he mutters as he slips on his jacket and straightens his bowtie. "Shall I zip you up?"

"Please. Then why is she on your pin board?"

"An oversight on my part. How's my tie?" He raises his chin, like a small boy, and I grin, and straighten it for him.

"Now it's perfect."

"Like you," he murmurs, and he stoops down and grabs me, kissing me passionately. "Feeling better?"

"Much, thank you."

"The pleasure is all mine, Miss Swan."

The guests are assembling on the dance floor. Edward grins at me, we've made it just in time, and leads me onto the checkered floor.

"And now ladies and gentlemen, it's time for the first dance. Dr. and Mrs. Cullen, are you ready?" Carlisle nods in agreement, his arms around Esme.

"Ladies and Gentlemen of the First Dance auction, are you ready?" We all nod in agreement. Alice is with someone I don't recognize. Hmmm, what happened to Harry?

"Then we shall begin. Take it away, Sam!"

A young man strolls on to the stage amid warm applause, turns to the band behind him, snaps his fingers, and the familiar strains of ‘I’ve Got You Under My Skin’ fill the air.

Edward smiles down at me, takes me in his arms and starts to move. Oh, he dances so well, making it so easy to follow. We grin at each other like idiots as he whirls me around the dance floor.

I've got you under my skin

I've got you deep in the heart of me

“I love this song,” Edward murmurs, gazing down at me. “Seems very fitting.” He’s no longer grinning, but serious.

“You’re under my skin, too,” I respond. “Or you were, a moment ago.”

He purses his lips at me, but doesn’t manage to hide his amusement.

“Miss Swan,” he admonishes me teasingly. “I had no idea you could be so crude.”

“Oh, it’s all my recent experiences. They’ve been an education.”

“For both of us.” Edward is serious again, and it could just be the two of us and the band. We are in our own private bubble.

-

I'd sacrifice anything come what might

For the sake of having you near

In spite of a warning voice that comes in the night

And repeats, repeats in my ear

-

Don't you know little fool, you never can win

Use your mentality, wake up to to reality

But each time I do, just the thought of you

Makes me stop before I begin

'Cause I've got you under my skin

-

As the song comes to and end we both applaud. Sam the singer bows graciously and introduces his band.

"May I cut in?"

I recognize the man who bid on me at the auction. Edward grudgingly lets me go, but he's amused, too.

"Be my guest," he murmurs. "Isabella, this is John Banner. John, Isabella."

Shit! Edward smirks at me and wanders off to one side of the dance floor.

"How do you do, Isabella?" Dr. Banner says smoothly, and I realise he's British.

"Hello," I stutter.

The band strikes up another song and Dr. Banner pulls me into his arms. He's much younger than I imagined, though I can't see his face. He's wearing a mask similar to Edward's. He's tall, but not as tall as Edward, and he doesn't move with Edward's easy grace. What do I say to him? *Why is Edward so fucked up?* It's the only thing I want to ask him, but somehow that seems rude.

"You seem nervous, Isabella," he murmurs.

"Well, Doctor Banner, you're a shrink. I'm worried what I might reveal, so I find you initmidating… and really, I only want to ask you about Edward."

He smiles kindly.

"Firstly, this is a party so I'm not on duty," he whispers conspiratorially, "And secondly, I really can't talk to you about Edward. Besides," he teases, "we'd need until Christmas."

I gasp in shock.

"That's a doctor's joke, Isabella."

I flush, embarrassed, and then feel slightly resentful.

"And you've just confirmed what I've been saying to Edward – that you're an expensive charlatan," I tease in return.

Dr. Banner snorts with laughter.

“You could be on to something there.”

“You’re British?”

“Yes. Originally from London.”

“How did you find yourself here?”

“Happy circumstance.”

“You don’t give much away, do you?”

“There’s not much to give away. I’m really a very dull person.”

“That’s very self-deprecating.”

“It’s a British trait. Part of our national character.”

“Oh…”

The music finishes and Edward is once more by my side. Dr. Banner releases me.

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you, Isabella,” and he gives me a look of satisfaction, or something. I feel that I’ve passed some kind of hidden test.

“John,” Edward nods at him.

“Edward.” Dr. Banner does the same, turns on his heel and disappears through the crowd.

Edward pulls me into his arms for the next dance.

“He’s much younger than I expected,” I murmur up at him. “And terribly indiscreet.”

Edward cocks his head to one side. “Indiscreet?”

“Oh, yes. He told me everything,” I tease.

“Well in that case, I’ll get your bag and we can go, because I’m sure you want nothing more to do with me,” he says softly.

I stop. “He didn’t tell me anything!” I say, panicked.

Edward pulls me into his arms again.

“Then let’s enjoy this dance,” he beams at me, and spins me around.

Why would he think that I'd want to leave? It makes no sense to me.

We dance for two more numbers and I realize I need the rest room.

“I won’t be long.”

As I make my way to the powder room, I remember I have left my bag on the dinner table, so I head down to the tent. When I enter it’s still lit, but quite deserted, except for a couple at the other end… who really ought to get a room. I reach for my bag.

“Isabella?”

A soft voice startles me and I turn to see a woman dressed in a long, tight black satin gown. Her mask is unique, in that it covers her face to her nose, but also covers her hair. It’s stunning, with elaborate gold filigree.

“I’m so glad I got you on your own,” she says softly. “I’ve been wanting to talk to you all evening.”

“I’m sorry… I don’t know who you are.”

She pulls the mask from her face and releases her hair.

Shit! It’s Mrs. Robinson.

Chapter 65

"I'm sorry, I startled you."

I gape at her. Holy cow. What the fuck does this woman want? I don't know what the social conventions are for meeting known molesters of children. She's smiling sweetly, gesturing for me to sit at the table, and because I am lacking any sphere of reference, I do as she asks out of stunned politeness, grateful that I am still wearing my mask.

"I'll be brief, Isabella. I know what you think of me – Edward's told me." I gaze at her impassively, giving nothing away, but I'm pleased that she knows. It saves me telling her, and she's cutting to the chase. Part of me is beyond intrigued about what she could have to say. She pauses, glancing over my shoulder. "Taylor's watching us." I peek around to see him scanning the tent by the doorway. Stuart is with him. They are looking anywhere but at us.

"Look, we don't have long," she says hurriedly. "It must be obvious to you that Edward loves you very much. I have never seen him like this… ever." She emphasizes the last word. Why? To reassure me? I don't understand.

"He won't tell you because he probably doesn't realize it himself, in spite of what I've said to him, but that's Edward. He's really not very attuned to any positive feelings and emotions he may have. He dwells far too much on the negative. But then you've probably worked that out for yourself. He doesn't think he's worthy."

I am reeling. Edward loves me? I know he hasn't said it, and this woman has told him - that's how he feels. How bizarre. I think of the iPod, his actions, his possessiveness, one hundred thousand dollars for a dance… is this love? I have to say, weirdly, having this woman confirm it for me is… unwelcome. I'd rather hear it from him. My heart constricts slightly. He feels unworthy… why?

"I've never seen him so happy, and it's obvious that you love him too." She smiles briefly, wistfully, even. "That's great, and I wish you both the best of everything, but what I wanted to say – is if you hurt him again, I will find you, lady, and it won't be pleasant when I do."

She stares at me, ice-cold blue eyes boring into my skull, trying to get under my mask … and her threat is so astonishing, so off the wall, that an involuntary, disbelieving giggle escapes me. Of all the things she could say to me… this is the least expected.

"You think this is funny, Isabella?" she splutters at me in dismay. "You didn't see him last Saturday."

I feel my face fall and darken. The thought of Edward unhappy is not a palatable one, and last Saturday I left him. He must have to gone to her. The thought makes me queasy. Why am I sitting here listening to this shit, from her of all people? I slowly rise, gazing at her intently.

"I'm laughing at your audacity, Mrs. Lincoln. Edward and I are nothing to do with you. And if I do leave him, and you come looking for me, I will be waiting – don't doubt it. And maybe I'll give you a taste of your own medicine, on behalf of the fifteen-year-old child you molested, and probably fucked up even more than he was already." Her mouth falls open. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have better things to do." I turn on my heel, adrenaline and anger coursing through my body, and stalk toward the entrance of the tent where Taylor is standing, just as Edward arrives, looking flustered and worried.

"There you are," he mutters, then frowns when he sees Irina.

I stride past him, saying nothing, giving him the opportunity to choose – her or me. He makes the right choice.

"Bella," he calls. I stop and face him as he catches up with me. "What's wrong?" He gazes down at me, concern etched on his face.

"Why don't you ask your ex?" I mutter acidly.

His mouth twists and his eyes go quite cold.

"I'm asking you," he says softly, but there's an edge to his voice.

We glare at each other. Okay, I can see this will end in an argument if I don't tell him.

"She's threatening to come after me if I hurt you again – probably with a whip," I snap at him.

He gazes at me, and he looks relieved, his mouth softening with humor.

"Surely the irony of that isn't lost on you?" he mutters, and I can tell he's trying hard to stifle his amusement.

"This isn't funny, Edward!"

"No, you're right. I'll talk to her." He adopts his serious face, though he's still suppressing his amusement.

"You will do no such thing." I fold my arms, my anger spiking again.

He blinks at me, surprised by my outburst.

"Look, I know you're tied up with her financially, forgive the pun, but …" I stop. What am I asking him to do? Give her up? Stop seeing her? Can I do that? "I need the restroom." I glare up at him, my mouth set in a grim line.

He sighs, and cocks his head to one side. Could he look any hotter? Is it the mask… or just him?

"Please don't be mad. I didn't know she was here. She said she wasn't coming." His voice is soft. Reaching up, he runs his thumb along my pouting bottom lip. "Don't let Irina ruin our evening, please, Isabella. She's really old news." Old being the operative word, I think uncharitably, as he tips my chin up and gently grazes his lips against mine.

I sigh in agreement, blinking up at him. He straightens and takes my elbow.

"I'll accompany you to the powder room so you don't get interrupted again."

He leads me across the lawn towards the luxurious temporary restrooms… Alice said they were hired-in for the occasion… I had no idea they came in deluxe versions.

"I'll wait here for you, baby," he murmurs.

When I come out, my mood is slightly better. I have decided not to let Mrs. Robinson blight my evening because that's probably what she wants. Edward is on the phone some distance away, out of earshot of the few people laughing and chatting nearby. As I get closer I can hear him – he's very terse. "Why did you change your mind? I thought we'd agreed. Well, leave her alone. This is the first normal relationship I've ever had, and I don't want you jeopardizing it through some misplaced concern for me. Leave. Her. Alone. I mean it, Irina." He pauses, listening. "No, of course not." He frowns deeply as he says this. Glancing up he sees me looking at him. "I have to go. Goodnight." He presses the off button.

I cock my head to one side and raise an eyebrow at him. Why is he phoning her?

"How's the old news?"

"Cranky," he replies sardonically. "Do you want to dance some more? Or would you like to go?" He glances at his watch. "The fireworks start in five minutes."

"I love fireworks."

"We'll stay and watch them then." He puts his arms around me and pulls me close. "Don't let her come between us, please."

“She cares about you,” I mutter.

“Yes, and I her – as a friend.”

“I think it’s more than a friendship to her.”

His brow furrows. “Isabella, Irina and me… it’s complicated. We have an unusual shared history. But it is just that, a history. As I’ve said to you time and time again, she’s a good friend. That’s all. Please forget about her.” He kisses my forehead and in the interests of not ruining our evening, I decide to let it go… I am just trying to understand.

We wander hand in hand back to the dance floor. The band is still in full swing.

“Isabella…”

I turn to find Carlisle standing behind us.

“I wondered if you’d do me the honor of the next dance,” Carlisle says softly, holding his hand out to me. Edward shrugs and smiles, releasing my hand, and I let Carlisle lead me onto the dance floor. Sam the bandleader launches into ‘Come Fly With Me’, and Carlisle puts his arm around my waist and gently whirls me into the throng. “I wanted to thank you for the generous contribution to our charity, Isabella.”

From his tone I suspect this is his roundabout way of asking whether I can afford it.

“Dr. Cullen…”

“Call me Carlisle, please, Bella.”

“I’m delighted to be able to contribute. I unexpectedly came into some money… I don’t need it. And it’s such a worthy cause.”

He smiles down at me… and I can see an opportunity for some innocent inquiries. *Carpe diem,* my subconscious hisses from behind her hand.

“Edward told me a little about his past, so I think it’s appropriate to support your work,” I add, hoping that this might encourage Carlisle to give me a small insight into the mystery that is Edward Cullen.

Carlisle is surprised.

“Did he now? That’s unusual. You certainly have had a very positive effect on him Isabella. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so… buoyant.”

I flush.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to embarrass you.”

“Well, in my limited experience, he’s a very unusual man.”

“He is,” Carlisle agrees quietly.

“Edward’s early childhood sounds hideously traumatic, from what he’s told me.”

Carlisle frowns, and I worry if I’ve overstepped the mark.

“I was the doctor on duty when the Seattle police brought him in. He was skin and bones… and badly dehydrated. He wouldn’t speak.” Carlisle frowns again, lost in the awful memory, in spite of the up-tempo music surrounding us. “In fact he didn’t speak for nearly two years. It was playing the piano that eventually brought him out of himself… oh, and Alice’s arrival of course.” He smiles down at me fondly.

“He plays beautifully,” I murmur. “And he’s accomplished so much…. you must be very proud of him.”

“Immensely so. He’s a very determined, very capable, very bright young man. But between you and me, Isabella, it’s seeing him like he is this evening – carefree, acting his age – that’s the real thrill for his mother and me. We were both commenting on it today… I believe we have you to thank for that.”

I think I blush to my roots. What am I supposed to say to this?

“He’s always been such a loner… we never thought we’d see him with anyone. Whatever you’re doing, please don’t stop. We’d like to see him happy.”

“I’d like to see him happy too,” I mutter, unsure of what else to say.

“Well, I’m very glad you came this evening. It’s been a real pleasure to see the two of you together.”

As the final strains of Come Fly With Me fade away Carlisle releases me and bows, and I curtsey, mirroring his civility.

“That’s enough dancing with old men.” Edward is at my side again. Carlisle laughs.

“Less of the old, son. I’ve been known to have my moments.” Carlisle winks at me playfully and saunters into the crowd.

“I think my dad likes you.” Edward raises a wary eyebrow… but I know he’s teasing.

“What’s not to like?” I peek coquettishly up at him through my lashes.

“Good point well made, Miss Swan.” He pulls me into an embrace as the band starts to play ‘It Had To Be You…’ “Dance with me,” He whispers seductively.

“With pleasure, Mr. Cullen,” I breathe in response, and he sweeps me across the dance floor once more.

At midnight we stroll down toward the shore, between the tent and the boathouse, where the other partygoers are gathered to watch the fireworks. The MC, back in charge, has permitted the removal of masks, the better to see the display. Edward has his arm around me, but I’m aware that Taylor and Stuart are close by, probably because we’re in the crowd now. They are looking anywhere but at the dockside where two pyrotechnicians dressed in black are making their final preparations. Seeing Taylor reminds me of Lauren. Perhaps she’s here… shit. The thought chills my blood, and I huddle closer to Edward. I sense him glancing down at me and he pulls me closer.

“You okay, baby?” he breathes.

“Fine,” I respond. I glance quickly behind us and see the other two security guys, whose names I forget, standing close by. Moving me in front of him Edward puts both his arms around me, over my shoulders.

Suddenly a stirring classical soundtrack booms over the dock, and two rockets soar into the air, exploding with a deafening bang over the bay, lighting it all in a dazzling canopy of sparkling orange and white, its reflection glittering over the still calm water of the bay. My jaw drops. I can’t recall ever seeing a display this impressive, except perhaps on TV… and it never looks this good on TV. All in time to the music… volley after volley, bang after bang, light after light… and the crowd answering with gasps, and ooohs, and ahhs. It is out of this world. And on a pontoon in the bay, several silver fountains of light shoot up, twenty feet in the air, changing color through blue, green, red and back to silver – and yet more rockets explode as the music reaches its crescendo. My face is beginning to ache from the ridiculous grin of wonder plastered across it. I look up quickly at Fifty, and he’s the same, marveling like a child at the sensational show. For the finale a volley of six rockets shoot into the dark and explode simultaneously, bathing us in a glorious golden light, as the crowd erupts into frantic, enthusiastic applause.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the MC calls out as the cheers and whistles fade.

“Just one note to add, at the end of this wonderful evening… your generosity has raised a total of one million, eight hundred and fifty three thousand dollars!”

Spontaneous applause erupts again, and out on the pontoon a message lights up in silver streams of sparks – the words *Thank You From Coping Together* dazzling and glowing over the water.

“Oh Edward – that was wonderful.” I grin up at him and he bends down to kiss me.

“Time to go,” he murmurs. His beautiful face gazes down at me, smiling, and his words hold so much promise… jeez… suddenly I feel very tired. He glances up again, and Taylor is close. The crowd is dispersing around us.

They don’t speak but something passes between them.

“Stay with me a moment. Taylor wants us to wait while the crowd disperses.”

Oh…

“I think that firework display probably aged him a hundred years,” he adds.

“Doesn’t he like fireworks?”

Edward gazes down at me fondly, and shakes his head at me, but doesn’t continue.

“So… Aspen,” he says, and I know he’s trying to distract me from something... and it works.

“Oh no, I haven’t paid for my bid,” I gasp.

“You can send a check. I have the address.”

“You were really mad.”

“Yes, I was.”

I grin. "I blame you and your toys."

“You were quite overcome, Miss Swan. A most satisfactory outcome if I recall." He smiles salaciously. "Where are they, incidentally?”

“In my bag.”

“I’d like them back.” He smirks down at me. “They are far too potent a device to be left in your innocent hands.”

“Worried I might be quite overcome again... maybe with somebody else?”

His green eyes glitter dangerously. “If you wear them when I’m not around, yes.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“Implicitly. Now, can I have them back?”

“I’ll think about it. ” He narrows his eyes at me.

There’s music once more from the dance floor, but it’s a DJ… playing a thumping dance tune, the bass pounding out a relentless beat.

“Do you want to dance?”

“I’m really tired, Edward. I’d like to go… if that’s okay.”

Edward glances at Taylor, who nods, and we set off towards the house following a couple of drunken guests. I’m grateful when Edward takes my hand. My feet are aching from the dizzying height and tight confinement of my green shoes. Alice comes bounding up to us.

“You’re not going are you? The real music’s just beginning… come on Bella,” she grabs my free hand.

“Alice,” Edward snaps sternly. “Isabella’s very tired. We’re going home. Besides, we have a big day tomorrow.”

We do…?

Alice pouts, but surprisingly doesn’t push Edward.

“Well, you must come by sometime next week. Maybe we can hit the mall.”

“Sure, Alice.” I grin, though in the back of my mind I'm wondering how I will... since I have a job.

She gives me a quick kiss, then hugs Edward fiercely, taking us both by surprise. More astoundingly still, she places her hands directly on the lapels of his jacket… and he just gazes down at her, indulgently.

“I like seeing you this happy,” she says sweetly and kisses him on the cheek. “Bye you guys… have fun.” She gambols off towards her waiting friends… among them Jane, who looks even more sour-faced without her mask. I wonder idly where Harry is…

“We’ll say goodnight to my parents before we leave. Come.” Edward leads me through a gaggle of guests to Esme and Carlisle, who wish us fond and warm farewells.

“Please do come again, Isabella. It’s been lovely having you here,” says Esme kindly.

I am a little overwhelmed by both her and Carlisle’s reaction. Fortunately, Esme’s parents seem to have gone to ground, so at least I am spared their enthusiasm.

Finally Edward and I walk quietly, hand in hand, to the front of the house where countless cars are lined up and waiting to collect guests. I glance up at Fifty. He looks… happy. It's a real pleasure to see him this way... unusual. After this extraordinary day... I shake my head trying to remember all that has happened.

"Are you warm enough?” he asks.

“Yes, thank you.” I clasp my chiffon shawl.

“I really enjoyed this evening, Isabella. Thank you.”

“Me too… some parts more than others.”

He grins and nods... then his brow creases slightly. “Don’t bite your lip,” he warns... in such a way that clenches the muscles deep in my belly.

“What did you mean about a big day tomorrow?” I ask to distract myself.

“Dr. Greene is coming to sort you out. Plus, I have a surprise for you.”

“Dr. Greene!” I halt.

“Yes."

"Why?"

"Oh, Isabella… I hate condoms,” he says quietly, green eyes glinting in the soft light from the paper lanterns, gauging my reaction.

“It’s my body,” I mutter, annoyed that he hasn’t asked me.

“It’s mine, too,” he whispers.

I gaze up at him as various guests pass by, ignoring us. He looks so earnest… yes, my body *is* his. He knows it better than I do. I reach up, and he flinches ever so slightly, but stays still. Grasping the corner of his bowtie I pull, so it unravels, revealing the top button of his shirt. Gently, I undo it.

"You look hot like this," I whisper. Actually he looks hot all the time, but really hot like this.

He smirks at me.

"I need to get you home. Come."

At the car Stuart hands Edward an envelope. He frowns at it and glances at me as Taylor ushers me into the car. Taylor looks relieved for some reason. Edward climbs in beside me and hands me the envelope, unopened, as Taylor and Stuart take their seats in the front.

"It's addressed to you. One of the waiters gave it to Stuart. No doubt from yet another ensnared heart." Edward's mouth twists. It's obvious this is an unpleasant concept to him.

I stare at the note… who is this from? Ripping it open, I read it quickly in the dim light. Holy shit… it's from her! Why won't she leave me alone?

I may have misjudged you. And you have definitely misjudged me. Call me if you need to fill in any of the blanks. We could have lunch. Edward doesn't want me talking to you, but I would be more than happy to help. Don't get me wrong, I approve, believe me, but so help me, if you hurt him…. he's been hurt enough.
Call me: 206 958 2445
Mrs. Robinson

Fuck… she's signed it Mrs Robinson! He told her. The bastard.

"You told her?"

"Told who, what?"

"That I call her Mrs. Robinson," I snap.

"It's from Irina?" Edward is shocked. "This is ridiculous," he grumbles, running a hand through his hair, and I can feel his irritation. "I'll deal with her tomorrow. Or Monday," he mutters bitterly. And though I'm ashamed to admit it, a very small part of me is pleased. My subconscious nods sagely. She's pissing him off, and this can only be good – surely. I decide to say nothing for now, but stash her note in my bag, and in a gesture guaranteed to lighten his mood, I hand him back the balls.

"Until next time," I breathe.

He glances at me and it's hard to see his face in the dark, but I think he's smirking. He reaches for my hand and squeezes it. I gaze out of the window into the darkness, reflecting on this long day. I've learned so much about him, gleaned so many missing details – the salons, the road map, his childhood – but there's still so much more to discover. And about Mrs. R… yes, she cares for him, and deeply, it would appear. I can see that, and he cares for her, but not in the same way. I don't know what to think any more… all this is making my head hurt.

Edward wakes me just as we pull up outside Escala.

"Do I need to carry you in?" he asks gently.

I shake my head sleepily. No way.

As we stand in the elevator I lean against him, putting my head against his shoulder. Stuart stands in front of us, shifting uncomfortably.

"It's been a long day, eh Isabella?"

I nod.

"Tired?"

I nod.

"You're not very talkative."

I nod and he grins.

"Come on – I'll put you to bed." He takes my hand as we exit the elevator, but we stop in the foyer when Stuart holds up his hand. In that split second I am miraculously wide-awake. Stuart talks into his sleeve… I had no idea that he was wearing a radio.

"Will do, T," he says, and turns to face us. "Mr. Cullen, the tires on the Volvo have been slashed and paint thrown all over it."

Holy shit... my car! Who would do that? And I know the answer as soon as the question materializes in my mind. *Lauren.* I glance up at Edward, and he blanches.

"Taylor is concerned that the perp may have entered the apartment, and may still be there."

"I see," Edward whispers.

Oh shit… she's got into the apartment before.

"What's Taylor's plan?"

"He's coming up in the service elevator with Ryan and Jim. They'll do a sweep and then give us the all clear. I'm to wait with you, sir."

"Thank you, Stuart." Edward tightens his arm around me. "This day just gets better and better," he mutters, nuzzling my hair. "Listen, I can't stand here and wait. Stuart, take care of Miss Swan. Don't let her in until you have the all-clear."

What?

"No, Edward – you have to stay with me," I plead.

Edward releases me.

"Do as you're told, Isabella," Edward says coldly. "Wait here. I'll be fine. Stuart?"

Stuart opens the foyer door to let Edward enter the apartment, then shuts the door behind him and stands in front of it, staring impassively down at me.

Holy shit… Edward… all manner of horrific outcomes run through my mind.

But all I can do is stand and wait.

Chapter 66

Stuart talks into his sleeve.

"Taylor, Mr. Cullen has entered the apartment." He flinches and grabs the earpiece, presumably receiving from some powerful invective from Taylor. *Oh no* – if Taylor is worried…

"Please let me go in," I plead.

"Sorry, Miss Swan. This won't take long." Stuart holds both hands up in a defensive gesture. "Taylor and the guys are just coming into the apartment now."

Oh – I feel so impotent. I stand stock-still, listening avidly for the slightest sound, but all I can hear is my aggravated breathing. It's so loud… and shallow. My scalp prickles, my mouth is dry, and I feel faint. Please let Edward be okay, I pray silently.

I have no idea how much time passes… and still we hear nothing. Surely no sound is good… no – gunshots. I begin pacing round the table in the foyer, looking at the paintings on the walls. I've never really looked at them before: all figurative paintings, all religious in context – the Madonna and child… all sixteen of them. How odd? Edward isn't religious… is he? All of the paintings in the great room are abstracts – these are so different. They don't distract me for long – where is Edward?

I stare at Stuart and he watches me impassively.

"What's happening?"

"No news, Miss Swan."

Abruptly the door-handle moves. Stuart spins like a top and draws a gun from his shoulder holster.

I freeze.

Edward appears at the door.

"All clear," he says, frowning at Stuart. Stuart puts his gun away immediately and steps back to let me in. "I think Taylor is over-reacting," Edward grumbles as he holds out his hand to me. I stand gaping at him, unable to move, drinking in every little detail: his unruly hair, the tightness round his eyes, the tense jaw, the top two buttons of his shirt undone… I think I must have aged a hundred years. Edward frowns at me in concern, his green eyes a dark jade.

"It's alright, baby." He moves towards me, and enveloping me in his arms, kisses my hair. "Come on, you're tired. Bed."

"I was so worried," I breathe, reveling in his embrace, inhaling his sweet, sweet, scent, my head against his chest.

"I know. We're all jumpy."

Stuart has disappeared, presumably into the apartment.

"Honestly, your exes are proving to be very challenging, Mr. Cullen." I murmur wryly. I feel Edward relax slightly.

"Yes. They are," he says quietly.

He releases me and taking my hand, leads me into the apartment, into the great room.

"Taylor's checking all the wardrobes and cupboards. I don't think she's here."

"Have you searched your playroom?" I whisper.

Edward glances quickly at me, his brow creasing.

"Yes… it's locked, but Taylor and I checked."

I take a deep cleansing breath. Good… it's all okay. She's not here.

"Do you want a drink or anything?"

"No."

Fatigue sweeps through me. I just want to go to bed.

"Come. Let me put you to bed. You look shattered," Edward murmurs.

I frown… isn't he coming too? Does he want to sleep alone? I'm relieved when he leads me into his bedroom. I place my clutch bag on the chest of drawers and open it to empty the contents. I spy Mrs. Robinson's note.

"Here," I mutter, passing it to Edward. "I don't know if you want to read this. I want to ignore it."

Edward scans it briefly and his jaw tenses slightly.

"I'm not sure what blanks she can fill in," he mutters dismissively. "I need to talk to Taylor." He gazes down at me. "Let me undo your dress."

"Are you going to call the police about the Volvo?" I ask as I turn around.

He sweeps my hair out of the way, his fingers softly grazing my naked back, and pulls the zipper at the back of my dress.

"No. I don't want the police involved. Lauren needs help, not police intervention, and I don't want them here. We just have to double our efforts to find her." He leans down and plants a gentle kiss on my shoulder.

"Go to bed," he orders, and then he's gone.

I lie staring at the ceiling, waiting for him to return. So much has happened today, so much to process. Where to start?

I wake with a jolt – disorientated – have I been asleep? Blinking in the dim glow cast through the slightly open door by the light in the hallway, I notice that Edward is not with me. Where is he? I glance up. Standing at the end of the bed is a tall shadow… a woman, maybe… dressed in black? It's difficult to tell. In my befuddled state, I reach across and switch on the bedside light, then turn back to look… there's no one there. I shake my head. Did I imagine it… dream it? I sit up and look around the room, a vague, insidious unease gripping me, but I am quite alone. I rub my face. What time is it? Where's Edward? I glance at the radio alarm. 2:15 am it reads. Clambering groggily out of bed I go to hunt him down, discomfited by my overactive imagination. I am seeing things now... must be a reaction to the dramatic events of the evening.

The main room is empty, the only light emanating from the three pendulum lamps above the breakfast bar. But his study door is ajar and I can hear him on the phone.

"I don't know why you're calling at this hour. I have nothing to say to you… Well, you can tell me now, you don't have to leave a message."

I stand motionless by the door, eavesdropping... guiltily. Who is he talking to?

"No *you* listen. I asked you, and now I am telling you. Leave her alone. She's nothing to do with you. Do you understand?"

He sounds so belligerent… really angry. I hesitate to knock.

"I know you do. But I mean it, Irina. Leave her the fuck alone. Do I need to put it in triplicate for you? Are you hearing me?... Good. Good night."

I hear him slam the phone down on the desk.

Oh shit.

I knock tentatively on the door.

"What?" he snarls, and I almost want to run and hide.

He sits, his copper-haired head in his hands, at his desk. He glances up, his expression ferocious, but his face softens immediately when he sees it's me, his eyes wide and cautious. He looks so tired suddenly… my heart constricts. He blinks at me and his eyes sweep down my legs and back again. I am wearing one of his t-shirts.

"You should be in satin or silk, Isabella," he breathes. "But even in my t-shirt you look so beautiful."

Oh… an unexpected compliment.

"I missed you. Come to bed."

He rises slowly out the chair. He's in just his white shirt and black dress pants… green eyes shining, suddenly full of promise, but there's a trace of sadness, too. He stands in front of me, staring intently into my eyes, not touching me.

"Do you know what you mean to me?" he murmurs. "If something happened to you, because of me…" his voice trails off, his brow creasing, and the pain that flashes across his face is almost palpable. He looks so vulnerable – his fear very much apparent.

"Nothing's going to happen to me," I reassure him, my voice soothing.

I reach up and stroke his face, running my fingers through the stubble on his cheek… so unexpectedly soft.

"Your beard grows quickly," I murmur, unable to hide the wonder in my voice at this beautiful, fucked-up man who stands before me. I trace the line of his bottom lip and then trail my fingers down his throat, to the faint smudge of lipstick at the base of his neck. He gazes down at me, still not touching me, his lips slightly parted. I can hear his soft breathing, quicker now. I run my index finger along the line and he closes his eyes. My fingers reach the edge of his shirt and I run them down to the next fastened button.

"I'm not going to touch you, I just want to undo your shirt," I whisper.

His eyes open wide, regarding me with alarm. But he doesn't move, and he doesn't stop me. Very slowly, I unfasten the button, holding the material away from his skin, and move tentatively down to the next button… repeating the process – slowly, concentrating on what I am doing – I don't want to touch him. Well, I do… but I won't. On the fourth button the red line reappears, and I smile shyly up at him.

"Back on home territory," I whisper, and trace the line with my fingers before undoing the final button. I pull his shirt open, and moving to his cuffs remove his black polished stone cufflinks, one at a time.

"Can I take your shirt off?" I ask quietly.

He nods, eyes still wide, as I reach up and pull his shirt over his shoulders. He frees his hands so that he's standing in front of me naked from the waist up. With his shirt off, he seems to recover his equilibrium. He smirks down at me.

"What about my pants, Miss Swan?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"In the bedroom. I want you in your bed."

"Do you now? Miss Swan, you are insatiable."

"I can't think why."

I grab his hand, pull him from his study and lead him to his bedroom. The room is chilly.

"You opened the balcony door?" he asks, frowning down at me as we arrive in his room.

"No…" I don't remember doing that. I recall scanning the room when I woke. The door was definitely closed.

Oh shit… all the blood rushes from my face and I stare at Edward as my mouth falls open.

"What?" he snaps glaring at me.

"When I woke… there was someone in here," I whisper. "I thought it was my imagination."

"What?" He looks horrified.

Edward dashes to the balcony door and peers out. Then steps back into the room and locks the door behind him.

"Are you sure? Who?" he asks, his voice tight.

"A woman… I think. It was dark. I'd only just woken up."

"Get dressed," he snarls at me on his way back in. "Now!"

"My clothes are upstairs," I whimper.

He grasps my hand, and pulling open one of the drawers in his chest of drawers, fishes out a pair of sweatpants.

"Put these on." He is not to be argued with. I struggle into them… they are far too big. He swipes a t-shirt too and quickly pulls it over his head. Grabbing the bedside phone, he presses two buttons.

"She's still fucking here," he hisses down the phone.

Approximately three seconds later, Taylor and one of the other security guys burst into Edward's bedroom. Edward gives them a précis of what has happened.

"How long ago?" Taylor demands, staring at me, all business-like. He's still wearing his jacket. Does this man ever sleep?

"About ten minutes," I mutter, for some reason feeling guilty.

"She knows the apartment like the back of her hand," says Edward. "I am taking Isabella away, now. We need a thermal imaging camera – Barney will have something at CEH, and structural plans of the building… maybe she's in the walls. Call Barney now, get him out of bed. She's hiding here somewhere. When is Gail back?"

"Tomorrow evening, Sir."

"She's not to return until this place is secure. Understand?" Edward snaps.

"Yes, Sir. Will you be going to Bellevue?"

"I'm not leading this problem to my parents. Book me somewhere."

"Yes. I'll call you, Sir."

"Aren't we over-reacting slightly?" I ask.

Edward glowers at me. "She may have a gun," he growls.

"Edward, she was standing at the end of the bed… she could have shot me then, if that's what she wanted to do."

Edward pauses for a moment… to gather his temper, I think. In a menacingly soft voice he says, "I'm not prepared to take the risk. Taylor – Isabella needs shoes."

Taylor nods and disappears. Edward disappears into his closet while the security guy watches me. I can't remember his name, Ryan maybe... He looks alternately down the hall and to the balcony windows. Edward emerges a couple of minutes later with a leather messenger bag, wearing jeans and his pinstriped blazer. He drapes a denim jacket around my shoulders.

"Come."

He clasps my hand tightly and I have to practically run to keep up with his long strides into the great room.

"I can't believe she could hide somewhere in here," I mutter, staring out the balcony doors.

"It's a big place. You haven't seen it all yet."

"Why don't you just call her, tell her you want to talk to her?"

"Isabella, she's unstable, and she may be armed," he says irritably.

"So we just run?"

"For now – yes."

"Supposing she tries to shoot Taylor?"

"Taylor is quicker with a gun than she is – they're pretty hard to fire… it's not like in the movies."

"You're talking to a Police Chief's daughter. I know how to shoot."

Edward raises his eyebrows and for a moment looks utterly bemused.

"You, with a gun?" he says incredulously.

"Yes." I am affronted. "I can shoot, Mr. Cullen – so you'd better beware – it's not just crazy ex-subs you need to worry about."

"I'll bear that in mind, Miss Swan," he answers dryly, amused, and it feels good to know that even in this ridiculously tense situation. I can make him smile.

Taylor meets us beside the foyer and hands me my small suitcase and my black Converse. I am stunned that he's packed me some clothes. Oh my. I smile shyly at him with gratitude and his returning smile is swift and reassuring. Before I can stop myself, I hug him… hard. He's taken by surprise and when I release him he's pink in both cheeks.

"Be careful," I murmur.

"Yes, Miss Swan," he mutters.

Edward frowns at me and then looks questioningly at Taylor, who smiles very slightly and adjusts his tie.

"Let me know where I'm going," Edward says.

Taylor reaches into his jacket, pulls out his wallet and hands Edward a credit card.

"You might want to use this, Sir, when you get there."

Edward nods. "Good thinking."

Ryan joins us.

"Stuart and Jim report they found nothing, Sir," he says to Taylor.

"Accompany Mr. Cullen and Miss Swan to the garage."

The garage is deserted. Well, it is nearly three in the morning. Edward ushers me into the passenger seat of the R8. The Volvo is a complete mess – every tire slashed, bright red paint splattered all over it. It's chilling… and now I'm glad Edward is taking me somewhere else.

"A replacement will arrive on Monday," Edward says bleakly when he's seated beside me.

"How could she have known it was my car?"

He glances anxiously at me and sighs. "She had a Volvo. I buy one for all my submissives – it's the safest car in its class."

Oh…

"So not so much a graduation present then."

“Isabella, in spite of what I hoped, you have never been my submissive, so technically it is a graduation present.”

He pulls out of the parking space and speeds to the exit. *In spite of what he hoped… oh no…* my subconscious shakes her head sadly. This is what we come back to all the time.

“Are you still hoping?” I whisper.

The in-car phone buzzes.

“Cullen,” Edward snaps.

“Fairmont Olympic. In my name.”

“Thank you Taylor. And Taylor… Be careful.”

Taylor pauses.

“Yes Sir,” he says quietly, and Edward hangs up.

The streets of Seattle are deserted and Edward roars up Fifth Avenue towards the I-5. Once on the I-5, he floors the gas pedal, heading north. He accelerates so quickly I’m momentarily thrown back in my seat. I peek up at him. He’s deep in thought, emanating a deadly brooding silence… he hasn’t answered my question. He’s taking frequent glances at the rear view mirror, and I realise he’s checking that we’re not being followed. Perhaps that’s why we’re on the I-5… I thought the Fairmont was in Seattle. I gaze out of the window, trying to rationalize my exhausted, over active mind. If she’d wanted to hurt me, she had ample opportunity in the bedroom.

“No. It’s not what I hope for, not any more. I thought that was obvious.” Edward interrupts my introspection, his voice soft.

I blink at him, pulling his denim jacket tighter around me, and I don’t know if the chill is inside me or outside.

“I worry that… you know… that I’m not enough.”

“You’re more than enough. For the love of God Isabella, what do I have to do?”

Tell me you love me. Tell me about yourself.

“Why did you think I'd leave when I told you Dr. Banner had told me all there was to know about you?”

He sighs heavily, closing his eyes briefly, and for the longest time he doesn't answer.

“You cannot begin to understand the depths of my depravity, Isabella. And it’s not something I want to share with you.”

“And you really think I’d leave, if I knew?” My voice is high, incredulous. Doesn’t he understand that I love him?

“I know you’ll leave.”

“Edward… I... I think that’s really unlikely. I can’t imagine not being with you…” *Ever*...

“You left me once. I don’t want to go there again.”

“Irina said she saw you last Saturday,” I whisper quietly.

“Well, she didn’t.” He frowns.

“You didn’t go to see her, when I left?”

“No.” I can tell he’s irritated. “I just told you I didn’t – and I don’t like to be doubted,” he scolds me. “I didn’t go anywhere last weekend. I sat and made the glider you gave me. Took me forever,” he adds softly.

Oh... my heart constricts again. Mrs. Robinson said she saw him… Didn’t she? She's lying... why?

“Contrary to what Irina thinks, I don’t rush to her with all my problems, Isabella. I don’t rush to anybody. You may have noticed – I’m not much of a talker."

Edward shakes his head sadly.

“Carlisle told me you didn’t talk for two years.”

“Did he now?” Edward’s mouth presses into a hard line.

“I kind of pumped him for information,” I flush, embarrassed, staring at my fingers.

“So what else did Daddy say?”

“He said he was the doctor who examined you… when you were bought into the hospital. After you were discovered… in your apartment.”

Edward’s expression remains blank…careful.

“He said learning the piano helped. And Alice.”

His lips curl slightly in a fond smile… Alice.

“She was about six months old when she arrived. I was thrilled, Emmett less so. He’d already had to contend with my arrival. She was perfect.”

The sweet, sad, awe in his voice is… affecting.

“Less so now, of course,” he mutters and I recall her successful attempts at the ball to thwart our lascivious intentions. It makes me giggle.

Edward gives me a sideways glance.

“You find that amusing, Miss Swan?”

“Yes. She seemed determined to keep us apart.”

He laughs. “Yes, she’s quite accomplished.” He reaches across and squeezes my knee. “Well, I don’t think we’ve been followed…” Edward turns off the I-5 and heads back to central Seattle.

“Can I ask you something… about Irina?”

We are stopped at some traffic lights. He gazes at me warily.

“If you must,” he mutters, exasperated but I don’t let his irritability deter me.

“You told me ages ago that she loved you in a way you found acceptable. What did that mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asks, clearly appalled... why?

“Not to me.”

“I was out of control. I couldn’t bear to be touched. I can’t bear it now. For a fourteen, fifteen-year old adolescent boy with hormones raging, it was a very difficult time. She showed me a way to let off steam.”

Oh…

“Alice said you were a brawler.”

“Jeez, what is it with my loquacious family? Actually – it’s you.” We’ve stopped at more lights, and he narrows his eyes at me. “You inveigle information out of people.” He shakes his head in mock disgust.

“Alice volunteered that information. In fact, she was very forthcoming. She was worried you’d start a brawl in the tent if you didn’t win me at the auction,” I mutter indignantly.

“Oh baby, there was no danger of that. There was no way I would let anyone else dance with you.”

“You let Dr. Banner.”

“He’s always the exception to the rule.”

Edward pulls into impressive lush, leafy driveway of the Fairmont Olympic Hotel and parks up at the front door, beside a quaint stone fountain.

“Come.”

He climbs out of the car and reaches behind the seats for my suitcase and his messenger bag. A valet rushes towards us, looking surprised – no doubt at our late arrival – Edward tosses him the car keys.

“Name of Taylor,” he says. The valet nods and looks beyond delighted as he leaps into the R8 and drives off. Edward takes my hand and strides into the lobby.

As I stand beside him at the reception desk I feel utterly, utterly ridiculous. Here I am, in Seattle's most prestigious hotel, dressed in an oversized denim jacket, oversized sweatpants, and an old t-shirt next to this elegant, beautiful Greek god. No wonder the receptionist is looking from one to the other as if the equation doesn’t add up. Of course, she is dazzled by Edward. I roll my eyes as she flushes crimson and stutters. Jeez, even her hands are shaking.

“Do you need a hand with your bags, Mr. Taylor…?” she asks going scarlet again.

“No, Mrs. Taylor and I can manage.”

Mrs. Taylor! But I’m not wearing a ring. I put my hands behind my back.

“You’re in the Cascade Suite, Mr. Taylor, eleventh floor. Our bell boy will help with your bags.”

“We’re fine,” Edward says curtly. “Where are the elevators?”

Flushing Crimson explains and Edward grasps my hand once more. I glance briefly around the impressive, sumptuous lobby full of overstuffed chairs, deserted save for a dark haired woman sat on a cozy sofa, feeding tidbits to her poodle. She glances up and smiles at us as we make our way to the elevators… so the hotel allows pets? Odd for somewhere so grand!

The suite has two bedrooms, a formal dining room, and comes complete with grand piano. Wow. A log fire blazes in the massive main room. Jeez… this suite is bigger than my apartment.

"Well Mrs. Taylor, I don't know about you, but I'd really like a drink," Edward mutters locking the front door securely.

In the bedroom, he puts my case and his satchel on the ottoman at the foot of the king-size four-poster bed, and taking my hand, leads me into the main room where the fire is burning brightly. It's a welcome sight. I stand and warm my hands while Edward fixes us both a drink.

"Armagnac?"

"Please."

After a moment he joins me by the fire and hands me a crystal brandy glass.

"It's been quite a day, huh?"

I nod and his green eyes gaze at me searchingly, concerned.

"I'm ok," I whisper reassuringly. "How about you?"

"Well right now, I'd like to drink this and then, if you're not too tired, take you to bed and lose myself in you."

"I think that can be arranged, Mr. Taylor," I smile shyly at him.

"Mrs. Taylor, you're biting your lip."

Chapter 67

Edward shuffles out of his shoes and peels his socks off in front of me. The Armagnac is delicious, leaving a burning warmth in its wake as it glides silkily down my throat. When I glance up at Edward he's sipping his brandy, watching me, his eyes dark… hungry.

"You never cease to amaze me, Isabella. After a day like today – or yesterday, rather – you're not whining or running off into the hills screaming. I am in awe of you. You're very strong."

"You're a very good reason to stay," I murmur. "I told you Edward, I'm not going anywhere... no matter what you've done. You know how I feel about you."

His mouth twists slightly, as if he doubts my words, and his brow creases as if what I'm saying is painful for him to hear. *Oh, Edward.* What do I have to do to make you realize how I feel? *Let him beat you...* My subconscious sneers at me. I scowl inwardly at her.

"Where are you going to hang Jake's portraits of me?" I try to lighten the mood.

"That depends." His lips twitch. This is obviously a much more palatable topic of conversation for him.

"On what?"

"Circumstances," he says mysteriously. "The show's not over for a week, so I don't have to decide just yet."

I cock my head to one side and narrow my eyes.

"You can look as stern as you like, Mrs. Taylor, I am saying nothing," he teases.

"I may torture the truth from you."

He raises an eyebrow at me.

"Really, Isabella, I don't think you should make promises you can't fulfill."

Oh my… is that what he thinks? I place my glass on the mantelpiece and reaching over, much to Edward's surprise, take his glass and place it beside mine.

"Well, we'll just have to see about that," I murmur.

Very bravely – emboldened by the brandy, no doubt – I take Edward's hand and pull him towards the bedroom. At the foot of the bed, I stop. Edward is trying to hide his amusement.

"Now you have me in here Isabella, what are you going to do with me?" he murmurs teasingly.

"I'm going to start by undressing you. I want to finish what I started earlier…"

I reach for the lapels on his jacket, careful not to touch him, and he doesn't flinch, but I know he's holding his breath. Gently, I push his jacket over his shoulders and his eyes stay on mine… all humor gone, just burning green eyes, wary… *needful*… so many interpretations of his look. Oh, what is he thinking? I place his jacket on the ottoman.

"Now your t-shirt," I whisper, and lift it by the hem. He cooperates, raising his arms and backing away, making it easier for me to pull it off. Once it's off he gazes down at me, intently, wearing just his jeans, that hang so provocatively from his hips. I can see the band of his boxers. Moving up across his taut stomach, I come to the remains of the lipstick line, faded and smudged, and then his chest. I want nothing more than to run my tongue through his chest hair, to savor his taste.

"Now what?" he whispers, eyes blazing.

"I want to kiss you here…" I run my finger from hipbone to hipbone across his belly.

His lips part as he inhales sharply.

"I'm not stopping you," he breathes.

I reach down and take his hand.

"You'd better lie down then," I murmur, and lead him to the side of the four-poster bed. He looks bewildered, and it occurs to me that perhaps no one has taken the lead with him since… *No don't go there.* Lifting the covers, he sits on the edge of the bed, gazing up at me, waiting, eyes wide and serious. I stand before him, slipping off his denim jacket and letting it drop to the floor, then shuffle slowly out of his sweatpants. He rubs his thumb over the tips of his fingers. He's itching to touch me, I can tell, but he suppresses the desire. I take a deep breath and, beyond courageous, reach for the hem of my t-shirt and lift it over my head so I am naked before him. His eyes don't leave mine, but he swallows and his lips part.

"You are Aphrodite, Isabella."

I clasp his face in my hands, tip his head up and bend to kiss him. He groans low in his throat. As I place my mouth on his, he grabs my hips and before I know it I am pinned beneath him, his legs forcing mine apart, so that he's cradled against my body, between my legs, and he's kissing me, ravaging my mouth, our tongues entwined. His hand trails from my thigh, over my hip, along my belly to my breast, squeezing, kneading and pulling enticingly at my nipple. I groan and tilt my pelvis involuntarily against him, finding a delicious friction against the seam of his fly and his growing erection. He stops kissing me and gazes down at me, slightly bemused, breathless, and flexes his hips against me so I can feel his erection pushing against me… right *there*. I close my eyes and moan, and he does it again – but this time I push back, relishing his answering moan, as he kisses me again, continuing the slow delicious torture… rubbing me, rubbing him. And he's right, getting lost in him, it's intoxicating, to the exclusion of everything else. All my worries obliterated. I am here, in this moment, with him – my blood singing in my veins, thrumming loudly through my ears, mixed with sound of our panting breaths. I bury my hands in his hair, holding him to my mouth, consuming him, my tongue as avaricious as his. I trail my fingers down his arms, on to the waistband of his jeans, and push my intrepid, greedy hands inside, urging him on and on – forgetting everything, except us.

"You're going to unman me, Bella," he whispers suddenly, breaking away from me and kneeling up. He briskly pulls down his jeans and hands me a foil packet.

"You want me, baby, and I sure as hell want you. You know what to do."

With anxious dexterous fingers, I rip open the foil and slowly unroll the condom over him, and he grins down at me, his mouth open, eyes misty dark green… full of carnal promise. Leaning over me, he rubs his nose against mine, his eyes close, and deliciously slowly, he enters me. I grasp his arms and tilt my chin up, reveling in the exquisitely full feeling of his possession. He runs his teeth along my chin, eases back and then slides into me again… so slow, so sweet, so tender… his body pressing down on me, his elbows and his hands on either side of my face.

"You make me forget everything. You are the best therapy," he breathes, moving at an achingly leisurely pace, savoring every inch of me.

"Please, Edward – faster," I murmur, wanting more, now.

"Oh no, baby. I need this slow."

He kisses me sweetly, gently biting my lower lip and absorbing my soft moans. Oh my... I move my hands into his hair, and surrender myself to his rhythm as slowly and surely, my body climbs higher and higher and plateaus… and falls, hard and fast, as I come around him.

"Oh, Bella," he breathes as he lets go, my name a benediction on his lips, as he finds his release.

His head rests on my belly, his arms wrapped around me, my fingers forage in his unruly hair, and we lie like this for… how long? It's so late, and I am so tired, but I just want to enjoy the quiet serene after-glow of making love with Edward Cullen, because that's what we've done… gentle, sweet lovemaking. He's come a long way, as have I, in such a short time. It's almost too much to absorb. With all the fucked-up stuff, I am losing sight of his simple, honest journey with me.

"I will never get enough of you. Don't leave me," he murmurs and kisses my belly.

"I'm not going anywhere, Edward… and I seem to remember that I wanted to kiss your belly," I grumble sleepily.

I feel his grin against me.

"Nothing stopping you now, baby."

"I don't think I can move, I'm so tired."

Edward sighs and shifts reluctantly, coming to lie beside me with his head on his elbow, and dragging the covers over us. He gazes down at me, his eyes glowing, warm… loving.

"Sleep now, baby." He kisses my hair and wraps his arm around me, and I drift.

When I open my eyes, light is filling the room, making me blink. My head is fuzzy from lack of sleep. *Where am I?* Oh, the hotel. Various events flash through my mind. What a day!

"Hi," Edward murmurs, smiling fondly at me. He's lying beside me, fully dressed, on top of the bed. How long has he been here? Has he been studying me? Suddenly I feel incredibly shy and I can feel my face heat under his steady gaze.

"Hi," I murmur, grateful that I am lying on my front. "How long have you been watching me?"

"I could watch you sleep for hours, Isabella. But I've only been here about five minutes." He leans over and kisses me gently. "Doctor Greene will be here shortly."

"Oh." I'd forgotten about Edward's inappropriate intervention.

“Did you sleep well?” he inquires mildly. “Certainly seemed like it to me, with all that snoring.”

Oh, playful teasing Fifty.

“I do not snore!” I pout petulantly.

“No. You don’t.” He grins at me.

I can see the faint line of red lipstick still around his neck.

“Did you shower?”

“No. Waiting for you.”

“Oh… okay.”

“What time is it?”

“Ten-fifteen. I didn’t have the heart to wake you earlier.”

“You told me you didn’t have a heart at all.”

He smiles, sadly, but doesn’t answer.

“Breakfast is here – pancakes and bacon for you. Come on, get up, I’m getting lonely out here.” He swats me sharply on my behind, making me jump, and clambers off the bed. *Hmm… Edward’s version of warm affection.* As I stretch, I’m aware I vaguely ache all over… no doubt a result of all the sex, dancing and teetering in expensive high-heeled shoes. I stagger out of bed and make my way into the sumptuously appointed ensuite, going over the events of the previous day in my mind.

When I come out, I don one of the over-fluffy bathrobes that hang on a brass peg in the bathroom. Lauren, the girl who looks like me, that’s the most startling image my brain conjures for conjecture… and her eerie presence in Edward’s bedroom. What did she want? Me? Edward? To do what? And why the fuck has she wrecked my car? Edward said I would have another… another Volvo. A fleet of Swedish cars to match his fleet of submissives. The thought is unwelcome. Well, since I was so generous with the money he gave me, there's not a lot I can do. I wander into the main room of the suite. No sign of Edward. Finally, I find him in the dining room. I take a seat, grateful for the impressive breakfast laid before me. Edward is reading the Sunday papers and drinking coffee, his breakfast finished. He smiles at me.

“Eat up. You’re going to need your strength today,” he teases.

"And why is that? You going to lock me in the bedroom?" My inner goddess jerks awake suddenly, all disheveled, with a just-fucked look.

"Pleasant as that idea is, I thought we'd go out today. Get some fresh air."

"Is it safe?" I ask innocently, trying and failing to keep the irony from my voice.

Edward's face falls slightly and his mouth presses in a line.

"Where we're going, it is. And it's not a joking matter," he adds sternly, narrowing his eyes at me.

I flush, and stare down at my breakfast. I don't feel like being scolded after such a late night. I eat my breakfast in silence, feeling petulant. My subconscious is shaking her head at me. Fifty doesn't joke about my safety – I should know this by now. I want to roll my eyes at him, but I refrain. Okay, I'm tired and tetchy. I had a long day yesterday, and not enough sleep. Why oh why does he get to look as fresh as a daisy? Life is not fair.

There's a knock at the door.

"That'll be the good Doctor," Edward mumbles crossly, obviously still smarting from my irony.

He stalks from the table. Can't we just have a calm normal morning? I sigh heavily, and leaving half my breakfast get up to greet Doctor Depo-Provera.

We're in the bedroom and Dr. Greene is staring at me open-mouthed. She's dressed slightly more casually than last time, in a pale pink cashmere twin set and black pants, and her fine blond hair is loose.

"And you just stopped taking it? Just like that?"

I flush, feeling beyond foolish.

"Yes." Could my voice be any smaller?

"Well then, you could be pregnant," she says matter-of-factly.

What? The world falls away at my feet. My subconscious collapses on the floor retching and I think I'm going to be sick too. *NO!*

"Here – go pee into this." She's all business today, taking no prisoners.

Meekly, I accept the small plastic container she's offered me and wander in a daze into the ensuite. No. No. NO… No way… No way… Please no. *No.* What will Fifty do? I go pale. He'll freak. No, please! I whisper a silent prayer.

I hand Dr. Greene my sample and she carefully places a small white stick in it.

"When did your period start?"

How am I supposed to think in such minutiae when all I can do is stare anxiously at the white stick?

"Err… Wednesday? Not the one just gone, the one before that, June 3rd."

"And when did you stop taking the pill?"

"Sunday. Last Sunday."

She purses her lips.

"You should be okay," she says sharply. "I can tell by your expression that an unplanned pregnancy would not be welcome news. So Medroxyprogesterone is a good idea, if you can't remember to take the pill every day." She looks sternly at me, and I quail under her authoritative glare. Picking up the white stick, she peers at it.

"You're in the clear. You've not ovulated yet, so provided you've been taking proper precautions, you shouldn't be pregnant. Now let me counsel you about this shot. We discounted it last time because of the side effects, but quite frankly, the side effects of a child are far-reaching and go on for years." She smiles, pleased with herself and her little joke, but I can't begin to respond. I am too stunned. Dr. Greene launches into full disclosure mode about side effects, and I stand paralyzed with relief, not listening to a word. I think I'd tolerate any number of strange women standing at the end of my bed rather than confess to Edward that I might be pregnant.

"Bella!" Dr. Greene snaps. "Let's do this thing." She pulls me out of my reverie and I willingly roll up my sleeve.

Edward closes the door behind her and gazes at me warily.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

I nod mutely and he cocks his head to one side, his face tense with concern.

“Isabella, what is it? What did Dr. Greene say?”

I shake my head. “You’re good to go in seven days.”

“Seven days?”

“Yes.”

“Bella, what’s wrong?”

I swallow.

“It’s nothing to worry about. Please Edward, just leave it.”

Edward looms in front of me. He grasps my chin, tipping my head back, and stares emphatically into my eyes, trying to decipher my panic.

“Tell me,” he snaps insistently.

“There’s nothing to tell. I’d like to get dressed.” I pull my chin out of his reach.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, frowning at me.

“Let’s shower,” he says eventually.

“Of course,” I mutter, distracted, and his mouth twists.

“Come,” he says sulkily, and clasping my hand firmly, he stalks towards the ensuite as I trail behind him. I am not the only one in a bad mood, it seems. Firing up the shower, Edward quickly strips before turning to me.

“I don’t know what’s upset you, or if you’re just bad-tempered through lack of sleep,” he says while unfastening my robe. “But I want you to tell me. My imagination is running away with me, and I don’t like it.”

I roll my eyes at him, and he glares back at me. Okay… here goes.

“Dr. Greene scolded me about missing the pill. She said I could be pregnant.”

“What?” He pales and his hands freeze as he gazes at me, suddenly ashen.

“But I’m not. She did a test. It was a shock, that’s all. I can’t believe I was that stupid.”

He visibly relaxes.

"You're sure you're not?"

"Yes."

He blows out a deep breath.

"Good. Yes, I can see that news like that would be very upsetting."

I frown… *upsetting?*

"I was more worried about your reaction."

He furrows his brow at me, puzzled.

"My reaction? Well, naturally I'm relieved. It would be the height of carelessness and bad manners to knock you up."

"Then maybe we should abstain," I snap.

He gazes at me for a moment, as if trying to understand something, like I'm some kind of science experiment.

"You *are* in a bad temper this morning."

"It was just a shock that's all," I repeat mulishly.

Clasping the lapels of my robe, he pulls me into a warm embrace and kisses my hair, my head against his chest. I am distracted by his chest hair as it tickles my cheek… oh, if I could just nuzzle him!

"Bella, I'm not used to this," he murmurs. "My natural inclination it to beat it out of you, but I seriously doubt you want that."

Holy shit.

"No, I don't. This helps." I hug Edward tighter, and we stand for an age in a strange embrace, Edward naked and me wrapped in a robe. I am once again floored by his honesty. He knows nothing about relationships, and neither do I, except what I've learned from him. Well, he's asked for faith and patience… maybe I should do the same.

"Come, let's shower," Edward says eventually, releasing me. Stepping back, he peels me out of my robe and I follow him into the cascading water, holding my face up to the torrent. There's room for both of us under the gargantuan showerhead. Edward reaches for the shampoo and starts washing his hair. He hands it to me and I follow suit. Oh, this feels

good. Closing my eyes, I succumb to the cleansing, warming water. As I rinse off the shampoo, I feel his hands on me, soaping my body gently… my shoulders, my arms, under my arms, my breasts, my back. Very tenderly, he turns me around and pulls me against him as he continues down my body… my stomach, my belly… his skilled fingers between my legs, hmmm… my behind… Oh, it feels good – and so intimate. He turns me around to face him again.

"Here," he says quietly, handing me the bodywash. "I want you to wash off the remains of the lipstick." My eyes open in a flurry and dart quickly to his. He's staring at me intently, soaking wet and beautiful, his glorious bright green eyes giving nothing away. "Don't stray far from the line… please," he mutters tightly.

Oh… my.

"Okay," I murmur, trying to absorb the enormity of what he's just asked me to do – to touch him on the edge of the forbidden zone. I squeeze a small amount of soap on my hand, rub my hands together to lather up the soap, then place them on his shoulders and gently wash away the line of lipstick on each side. He stills and closes his eyes, his face impassive, but he's breathing rapidly, and I know it's not lust, but fear, and it cuts me to the quick, a swift hard punch to the gut. With trembling fingers, I carefully follow the line down the side of his chest, soaping and rubbing softly, and he swallows, his jaw tense, like he has his teeth clenched. Oh! My heart constricts and my throat tightens. Oh no, I'm going to cry. I stop to add more soap to my hand, and feel him relax slightly in front of me. I can't look up at him, I can't bear to see his pain – it's too much. I swallow.

"Ready?" I murmur, and I can hear the tension in my voice.

"Yes," he whispers, his voice husky, laced with fear.

And very gently, I place my hands on either side of his chest, and he freezes again... and it's too much for me. I am overwhelmed by his trust in me, his fear, the damage done to this beautiful, fallen, flawed man. Tears pool in my eyes and spill down my face, lost in the water from the shower. Oh Edward! Who did this to you? His diaphragm moves rapidly with each shallow breath, his body rigid, the tension radiating off him in waves, as my hands move along the line, erasing it. Oh, if I could just erase your pain, I would – I'd do anything – and I want nothing more than to kiss every single scar I can see, to kiss away those hideous years of neglect, but I know I can't.

"No. Please, don't cry," he murmurs, and I can hear his anguish as he wraps me tightly in his arms. "Please don't cry for me." And I burst into full-blown sobs, burying my face against his neck, as I think of a little boy lost in a sea of fear and pain, frightened, neglected, abused… hurt beyond all endurance.

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Pulling away, he clasps my head with both hands, tilts it backward and leans down to kiss me.

"Don't cry, Bella, please," he murmurs against my mouth. "It was long ago. I am aching for you to touch me, but I just can't bear it. It's too much. Please, please don't cry."

"I want to touch you, too. More than you'll ever know. To see you like this, so hurt and afraid, Edward, it wounds me so deeply. I love you so much."

He runs his thumb across my bottom lip.

"I know… I know." he whispers.

"You're very easy to love. Don't you see that?"

"No, baby, I don't."

"Well, you are. And I do, and so does your family. So do Irina and Lauren – yeah, they have a fucked-up way of showing it – but they do. You are worthy."

"Stop." He puts his finger over my lips and shakes his head, an agonized expression on his face. "I can't hear this. I'm nothing, Isabella. I am a husk of a man. I don't have a heart."

"Yes you do, and I want it, all of it. You're a good man, Edward, a really good man. Don't ever doubt that. Look at what you've done, what you've achieved," I gasp. "Look what you've done for me – what you've turned your back on, for me," I whisper. "I know. I know how you feel about me."

He gazes down at me, his eyes wide and panicked, and all we can hear is the steady stream of water as if flows over us into the shower.

"You love me," I whisper.

His eyes widen further and his mouth opens slightly. He takes a huge breath, as if winded. He looks tortured – vulnerable.

"Yes," he whispers. "I do."

Chapter 68

I cannot contain my jubilation. My subconscious gapes at me open-mouthed – a wholesome, gratifying stunned silence emanating from her – and I wear a face-splitting grin as I gaze longingly up into Edward's tortured, wide, brightest-green eyes. His soft, sweet confession calls to me on some deep elemental level, as if he's seeking absolution. His three small words are my manna from heaven. Tears prick my eyes once more. *Yes… you do. I know you do*. It's such a liberating realization, like a dark millstone has been tossed aside. This beautiful, fucked-up man, whom I once thought of as my romantic hero – strong, solitary, mysterious… he possesses all these traits, but he's also so fragile, so alienated, so full of self-loathing. My heart swells with joy, but also pain, for his suffering, and I know it's big enough for both of us. I *hope* it's big enough for both of us. I reach up to clasp his dear, dear, handsome face and kiss him gently, pouring all the love I feel into this one sweet connection. I want to devour him. Edward groans and his arms encircle me, clasping me tightly, holding me to him beneath the hot cascading water, as if I am the air he needs to breathe.

"Oh Bella," he whispers hoarsely, "I want you, but not here."

"Yes," I murmur fervently into his mouth.

He switches off the shower and takes my hand. Gently, he leads me out and enfolds me in my bathrobe. He grabs a towel for himself, wraps it around his waist, then takes a smaller one and begins to gently dry my hair. When he's satisfied, he swathes the towel around my head so that in the large mirror over the sink I look like I'm wearing a nun's habit. He's standing behind me and our eyes meet in the mirror, smoldering emerald green to wide chocolate brown, and it gives me an idea.

"Can I reciprocate?" I ask softly.

He nods, and his brow creases slightly. I reach for another towel from the plethora of beyond-fluffy towels stacked beside the vanity unit, and standing before him on tiptoe, I start to dry his hair. He bends slightly in my direction, making the process easier, and as I catch the occasional peek of his face beneath the towel I can see that he's grinning at me, like a small boy.

"It's a long time since anyone did this to me. A very long time," he murmurs, but then frowns. "In fact, I don't think anyone's ever dried my hair."

"Surely Esme did? Dried your hair, when you were young?"

He shakes his head, hampering my progress.

"No. She respected my boundaries from day one, even though it was painful for her. I was very self-sufficient as a child," he says softly, and I feel another swift kick in the ribs as I think of a small copper-haired child looking after himself because no one else cares. The thought is sickeningly sad. But I don't want my melancholy to hijack this blossoming intimacy.

"Well, I am honored," I gently tease him.

"That you are, Miss Swan. Or maybe it is I who am honored."

"That goes without saying, Mr. Cullen," I respond tartly.

I finish with his hair, reach for another small towel and move round to stand behind him. Our eyes meet again in the mirror and his watchful, questioning look prompts me to speak.

"Can I try something?"

After a moment he nods, warily, and very gently I run the soft cloth down his left arm, soaking up the water that has beaded on his skin. Glancing up, I check his expression in the mirror. He blinks at me, his eyes burning into mine. I lean forward and kiss his bicep softly and his lips part infinitesimally. I dry his other arm in a similar fashion, trailing kisses around his bicep, and a small smile plays at his lips. Carefully, I wipe his back beneath the faint lipstick line, which is still in evidence. I hadn't gotten round to washing his back.

"Whole back," he says quietly, "With the towel."

He takes a sharp breath and screws his eyes closed as I briskly dry him, careful to touch him only with the towel. He has such an attractive back – broad, sculptured shoulders, all the small muscles clearly defined. He really looks after himself, but of course he also has the scars. With difficulty, I ignore them and suppress my overwhelming urge to kiss each and every one. When I finish, he exhales, and I lean forward to plant a kiss on his shoulder. Putting my arms around him, I dry his belly. Our eyes meet once more in the mirror. He's amused, but wary too.

"Hold this." I hand him a smaller face towel and his expression turns to a bemused frown. "Remember in Florida, you made me touch myself, using your hands."

His face darkens slightly but I ignore his reaction, put my arms around him, and taking his hand, move it up to his chest to dry it. I gaze at him in the mirror - his beauty, his nakedness, and me with my covered hair. We look almost Biblical, as if from an Old Testament baroque painting. I reach for his hand, which he willingly entrusts to me, and guide it up to his chest to dry it slowly, awkwardly, sweeping the towel across his body. Once and then again. He's completely immobilized, immediately rigid with tension, except for his eyes, which follow my hand, clasped around his. My subconscious looks on with

approval, her normally pursed mouth relaxed, and I feel like the supreme puppet master. I can feel the anxiety rippling off his back, but he maintains eye contact, and his eyes are darker, more deadly. Showing their secrets maybe. Is this a place I want to go? Do I want to confront his demons?

"I think you're dry now," I whisper as I drop my hand, gazing into the green depths of his eyes in the mirror. His breathing is accelerated, lips parted.

"I need you, Isabella," he whispers.

"I need you, too." And as I say the words, I am struck how true they are. I cannot imagine not being with Edward… ever.

"Let me love you," he says hoarsely.

"Yes," I answer, and turning, he hauls me into his arms, his lips seeking mine, beseeching me, worshipping me, cherishing me, loving me.

He trails his fingers up and down my spine as we gaze at each other, basking in our post-coital bliss… replete. We lie together, me on my front hugging my pillow, he on his side, and I am treasuring his tender touch. I know that right now he needs to touch me. I am a balm for him, a source of solace, and how could I deny him that? And part of me knows that I feel exactly the same.

"So you can be gentle," I murmur.

"Hmmm, so it would seem, Miss Swan."

I grin.

"You weren't particularly the first time we… err… did this."

"No?" He cocks his head to one side and smirks slightly. "I feel I should be twirling a ridiculous comedy villain's mustache because I robbed you of your virtue."

"I don't think you robbed me," I mutter haughtily. *Jeez, I'm not a child.* "I think it was offered up pretty freely, and willingly. I wanted you too, and if I remember correctly, I rather enjoyed myself." I smile shyly at him, biting my lip.

"So did I, if I recall, Miss Swan. We aim to please," he drawls. Then his face softens, serious. "And it means you're mine, completely." All trace of humor has vanished as he gazes at me.

"Yes, I am," I murmur back at him. "I wanted to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"Your biological father – do you know who he was?" This thought has been bugging me. His brow creases slightly and then he shakes his head.

"I have no idea. Wasn't the savage who was her pimp, which is good."

"How do you know?"

"Something my Dad… something Carlisle said to me."

I gaze at my Fifty expectantly, waiting. He smirks at me.

"So hungry for information, Isabella." He sighs, shaking his head. "The pimp discovered the crack whore's body and phoned it in to the authorities. Took him four days to make the discovery though. He shut the door when he left, left me with her… her body." His eyes cloud at the memory. I inhale sharply. Poor baby boy. The horror is too grim to contemplate.

"Police interviewed him later. He denied flat out I was anything to do with him, and Carlisle says he looked nothing like me."

"Do you remember what he did look like?"

"Isabella, this isn't a part of my life I revisit very often. Yes, I remember what he looked like. I'll never forget him." Edward's face darkens and hardens, becoming more angular, his eyes frosting with anger. "Can we talk about something else?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

He shakes his head. "It's old news, Bella. Not something I want to think about."

"So what's this surprise then?"

I need to change the subject before he goes all Fifty on me. His expression lightens immediately.

"Can you face going out for some fresh air? I want to show you something."

"Of course."

I marvel how quickly he turns – mercurial as ever. He grins at me, with his boyish, carefree I'm-only-27 smile, and my heart lurches into my mouth. So it's something close to his heart, I can tell. He swats me playfully on my behind.

"Get dressed. Jeans will be good. I hope Taylor's packed some for you."

He rises and pulls on his boxers. Oh, I could sit here all day watching him wander around the room. My inner goddess agrees, swooning as she ogles from her chaise longue.

"Up," he scolds.

Bossy as ever. I gaze at him, grinning.

"Just admiring the view."

He rolls his eyes at me.

As we dress, I notice that we move with the synchronization of two people who know each other well, each watchful and acutely aware of the other, exchanging the occasional shy smile and sweet touch.

And it dawns on me that this is just as new for him as it is for me.

"Dry your hair," Edward orders once we're dressed.

"Domineering as ever." I smirk at him and he leans down to kiss my hair.

"That's never going to change, baby. I don't want you sick."

I roll my eyes at him and his mouth twists in amusement.

"My palms still twitch you know, Miss Swan."

"I am glad to hear it, Mr. Cullen. I was beginning to think you were losing your edge," I retort.

"I could easily demonstrate that is not the case, should you so wish." Edward drags a large cream cable-knit sweater out of his bag and drapes it artfully over his shoulders. With his white t-shirt and jeans, his just-fucked hair, and now this, he looks as if he's stepped out of the pages of a high-end glossy magazine. No one should look this good. And I don't know if it's the momentary distraction of his sheer perfect looks, or the knowledge that he loves me, but his threat no longer fills me with dread. This is my Fifty Shades. This is the way he is. As I reach for the hairdryer, I feel a tangible ray of hope that we will find a middle way. It's to do with recognizing each other's needs and accommodating them. I gaze at myself in

the dresser mirror. Taylor has packed my blue blouse, which he bought, I think shyly. My hair is a mess, my face flushed, my lips swollen. I touch them, remembering Edward's searing kisses, and I can't help a small smile as I stare. *Yes, I do*, he said.

"Where are we going exactly?" I ask as we wait in the lobby for the parking valet. Edward taps the side of his nose and winks at me conspiratorially, looking like he's desperately trying to contain his glee. Frankly, it's very un-Fifty. He was like this when we went gliding… perhaps that's what we're doing. I cannot help but beam back at him. He stares down his nose at me, in that way he has, with his lopsided grin. Leaning down, he kisses me gently.

"Do you have any idea how happy you make me feel?" he murmurs.

"Yes, I know exactly. Because you do the same for me."

The valet zooms up in Edward's car, wearing a face-splitting grin. Jeez, everyone is so happy today.

"Great car, Sir," he mumbles as he hands over the keys.

Edward winks and gives him an obscenely large tip. I frown at him. *Honestly!*

As we cruise through the traffic, Edward seems deep in thought. A young woman's voice comes over the loudspeakers – it has a beautiful, rich mellow timbre, and her words are breathtaking, reflecting my scattered, loved-up thoughts.

-

For you there'll be no crying

For you the sun will be shining

'*Cause I feel that when I'm with you*

It's alright, I know it's right

-

And the songbirds keep singing

Like they know the score

And I love you, I love you, I love you

Like never before

-

"I need to make a detour. It shouldn't take long," he says absentmindedly, distracting me from the song. *Oh, why?* I am beyond intrigued to know the surprise. My inner goddess is bouncing about like a five-year-old.

"Sure," I murmur. Something is amiss. Suddenly, he looks grimly determined.

-

To you, I would give the world To you,

I'd never be cold 'Cause I feel that when I'm with you

It's alright, I know it's right

-

He pulls into the parking lot of large car dealership, stops the car and turns to face me, his expression wary.

"We need to get you a new car," he says softly.

I gape at him. Now? On a Sunday? What the hell? And this is a Saab garage.

"Not a Volvo?" is, stupidly, the only thing I can think of to say, and bless him, he actually flushes slightly. Holy cow – Edward, embarrassed. This is a first.

"I thought you might like something else," he mutters. He's almost squirming. *Oh, please*… this is too valuable an opportunity not to tease him. I smirk.

"A Saab?"

"Yeah... A 9-3 maybe... Come."

"What is it with you and Swedish cars?"

"The Swedes make the safest cars in the world, Isabella."

Do they?

"I thought you'd already ordered me another Volvo?"

He gives me a darkly amused look.

"I can cancel that. Come." Climbing smoothly out of the car, he strolls gracefully around to my side and opens my door.

"I owe you a graduation present," he says softly and holds his hand out for me.

"Edward, you really don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do. Please. Come." His tone says he's not to be trifled with.

I resign myself to my fate. A Saab… do I want a Saab? I quite like the Submissive Special, the Volvo. It was very nifty. Of course, now it's under a ton of red paint. I shudder. And she's still out there. I take Edward's hand and we wander into the showroom.

Nigel Raizie, the salesman, is all over Fifty like a cheap suit. He can smell a sale. Weirdly, his accent sounds mid-Atlantic… maybe British? It's difficult to tell.

"A Saab, sir? Pre-owned?" And he's smarmy to boot.

"New." Edward's lips set into a hard line.

New!

"Did you have a model in mind, sir?"

"9-3 2.0T Sport Sedan."

"An excellent choice, sir."

"What color, Isabella?" Edward cocks his head to one side.

Holy crow.

"Err… black?" I shrug. "You really don't need to do this, Edward."

He frowns.

"Black's not easily seen at night."

Oh for heaven's sake. I resist the temptation to roll my eyes.

"You have a black car," I point out.

He scowls at me.

"Bright canary yellow then," I snap.

Edward makes a face – canary yellow is obviously not his thing.

"What color do you want me to get?" I ask, as if he's a small child – which he is, in many ways. The thought is unwelcome. Sad and sobering.

"Silver or white."

"Silver, then. You know I'll take the Volvo."

Nigel pales, sensing he's losing a sale.

"Perhaps madam would like the convertible?" he asks softly.

My subconscious is cringing in disgust, mortified by the whole buying-a-car business, but my inner goddess tackles her to the floor. *Convertible? Drool!*

Edward frowns and peers at me.

"Convertible?" he asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

I flush. It's like he has a direct hotline to my inner goddess, which of course he has. It's most inconvenient at times. I stare down at my hands.

Edward turns to Nigel. "What are the safety stats on the convertible?"

Nigel, sensing a vulnerability, heads in for the kill, reeling off all manner of statistics.

Of course Edward wants me safe. It's a religion with him, and like the zealot he is, he listens intently to Nigel's well-honed patter. Fifty really does care. *Yes, I do*. I remember those whispered, choked words from this morning, and a melting glow spreads like warm honey through my veins. This man – God's gift to women – loves me. I find myself grinning goofily at him, and when he glances down at me, he's amused, yet puzzled. I just want to hug myself, I am so happy.

"Whatever you're high on, I'd like some, Ms. Swan," he breathes as Nigel heads off to his computer.

“I’m high on you, Mr. Cullen.”

“Really? Well you certainly look intoxicated, Miss Swan.” He kisses me briefly. “And thank you for accepting the car. That was easier than last time.”

“Well, it’s not a Volvo.”

He smirks. “That’s not the car for you.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Sir – the 9-3? I’ve located one at our Beverley Hills dealership. We can have it here for you tomorrow.” Nigel glows with triumph.

“Top of the range?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Excellent.”

Edward produces his credit card… or is it Taylor’s? The thought is unnerving. I wonder how Taylor is, and if he’s located Lauren in the apartment. I rub my forehead. Yes, there’s all the baggage, too.

“If you’ll come this way, Mr…” Nigel glances at the name on the card. “Cullen.”

Edward opens my door and I climb back into the passenger seat.

“Thank you,” I say when he’s seated beside me.

He smiles.

“You’re most welcome, Isabella.”

The music starts again as Edward starts the engine.

-

I love you, I love you, I love, Like never before, Like never before

-

"Who's this?" I ask.

"Eva Cassidy."

"She has a lovely voice."

"She does. She did…"

"Oh."

"She died young."

"Oh."

"Are you hungry? You didn't finish all your breakfast." He glances quickly at me, disapproval outlined on his face.

Uh oh.

"Yes."

"Lunch first, then."

Edward drives toward the waterfront, then heads north along the Alaskan Way. Another beautiful day in Seattle. It's been uncharacteristically fine for the last few weeks, I muse. Edward looks happy and relaxed as we sit back listening to Eva Cassidy's sweet soulful voice and cruise down the highway. Have I ever felt so comfortable in his company before? I just don't know. I am less nervous of his moods, confident that he won't punish me, and he seems so much more comfortable with me too. He turns left, following the coast road, and eventually pulls up in parking lot opposite a vast marina.

"We're here. I'll open your door," he says, in such a way that I know it's not wise to move, and I watch him move around the car. Will this ever get old?

"Hungry?" he asks as he holds out his hand.

"Yes."

"Fish?"

"Ok."

He grins down at me and we stroll arm in arm to the waterfront, where the marina stretches out in front of us.

“So many boats…”

There are hundreds of them, all shapes and sizes, bobbing up and down on the calm, still waters in the marina. Out on The Sound, I can see dozens of sails in the wind, weaving to and fro, enjoying the fine weather. It’s a wholesome, outdoorsy sight. The wind has picked up a little so I pull my jacket around me.

“Cold?” he asks, and pulls me tightly against him.

“No, just admiring the view.”

“Yes. It’s very relaxing. Come, we’ll eat here.”

Edward leads me into a large seafront bar and makes his way to the counter. The décor is more New England than west coast – white-limed walls, pale blue furnishings and boating paraphernalia hanging everywhere. It’s a bright, cheery place.

“Mr. Cullen!” the barman greets Edward warmly. “What can I get you this afternoon?”

“Dante, good afternoon.” Edward grins as we both slip onto bar stools. “This lovely lady is Isabella Swan.”

“Welcome to SP’s Place.” Dante gives me a friendly smile. He’s black and beautiful, his dark eyes assessing me, and not finding me wanting, it seems. One large diamond stud winks at me from his ear. I like him immediately. “What would you like to drink, Miss Swan?”

I glance at Edward, who regards me expectantly. Oh! He’s going to let me choose.

“I’ll have whatever Edward’s drinking.” I smile shyly at Dante.

Fifty’s so much better at wine than me.

“I’m going to have a beer. This is the only bar in Seattle where you can get Adnam’s Explorer.”

“A beer?”

“Yes.” He grins at me. “Two Explorers please, Dante.”

Dante nods and sets up the beers on the bar.

“They do a delicious seafood chowder here,” Edward says to me quietly.

He's asking me.

"Chowder and beer sounds great." I smile at him.

"Two chowders?" Dante asks.

"Please." Edward grins at him.

We talk through our meal like we never have before. Edward is so relaxed and calm – he looks young, happy, and animated. He recalls the history of CEH, and the more he reveals, the more I sense his passion for fixing problem companies, his hopes for the technology he's developing, and his dreams of ending world hunger. I listen enraptured. He's funny, clever, philanthropic, and beautiful… and he loves me. In turn, he plagues me with questions about Charlie and Renee, about growing up in the desert and the damp sogginess that is Forks, and the contrast between the two. He demands to know my favorite books and films. It's surprising how much we have in common. And as we talk, it strikes me that he's turned from Alec to Angel – debasement to high ideal – in such a short space of time.

It's after two when we finish our meal. Edward settles the tab with Dante, who wishes us a fond farewell.

"This is a great place. Thank you for lunch," I say as Edward takes my hand and we leave the bar.

"We'll come again," he says and we stroll along the waterfront. "I wanted to show you something."

"I know, and I can't wait to see it, whatever it is."

We wander hand in hand along the marina. It is such a pleasant afternoon. People are out enjoying their Sunday, walking their dogs, admiring the boats, letting their kids run along the promenade. As we head down the marina the boats are getting progressively larger. Edward leads me on to the pontoon and stops in front of a huge catamaran.

"I thought we'd go sailing this afternoon. This is my boat."

Holy cow. It must be at least forty, maybe fifty feet. Two sleek white hulls, a deck, a roomy cabin and towering over them a very tall mast. I know nothing about boats, but I can tell this one is special.

"Wow…" I breathe.

"Built by my company," he says proudly and my heart swells. "She's been designed from the ground up by the very best naval architects in the world and constructed here in Seattle,

at my yard. She has hybrid electric drives, asymmetric dagger boards, a square-topped mainsail –"

"Ok – you've lost me, Edward."

He grins. "She's a great boat."

"She looks mighty fine, Mr. Cullen."

"That she does, Miss Swan."

"What's her name?"

He pulls me to the side so I can see her name, *The Esme*, and I'm surprised.

"You named her after your mom?"

"Yes." He cocks his head to one side, quizzical. "Why do you find that puzzling?"

I shrug. I am surprised. He always seems… ambivalent in her presence.

"I adore my mom, Isabella. Why wouldn't I name a boat after her?"

I flush. "No, it's not that… it's just..." Shit, how can I put this into words?

"Isabella, Esme saved my life. I owe her everything."

Chapter 69

I gaze up at him, and let the reverence in his softly spoken admission wash over me. It's obvious to me, for the first time, that he loves his mom. Why then his strange, strained ambivalence towards her?

"Do you want to come aboard?" he asks, his eyes bright, excited.

"Yes, please." I smile back at him. He looks delighted and delightful in one wholesome, scrumptious package. Grasping my hand, he strides up the small gang-plank and leads me aboard so that we are standing on deck beneath a rigid canopy. To one side is a table and a U-shaped banquette covered in pale blue leather, which must seat at least eight people. I glance through the sliding doors to the interior of the cabin and jump, startled when I spy someone there. The tall blond man opens the sliding doors and emerges, all tanned, curly-haired and blue-eyed, wearing a faded pink short-sleeved polo shirt, shorts, and deck shoes. He must be in his early thirties.

"Mac," Edward beams.

"M.r Cullen! Welcome back."

They shake hands.

"Isabella, this is Liam McConnell. Liam, my girlfriend, Isabella Swan."

Girlfriend! My inner goddess performs a quick arabesque… she's still grinning over the convertible. I have to get used to this. It's not the first time he's said it, but hearing him say it is still a thrill.

"How do you do?"

Liam and I shake hands.

"Call me Mac," he says warmly and I can't place his accent. "Welcome aboard, Miss Swan."

"Bella, please," I mutter, flushing. He does have very blue eyes.

"How's she shaping up, Mac?" Edward interjects quickly, and for a moment I think he's talking about me.

"She's ready to rock and roll, sir." Mac beams. *Oh… the boat, The Esme.* Silly me.

"Let's get under way then."

"You going to take her out, sir?"

"Yep." Edward flashes Mac a quick wicked grin. "Quick tour, Isabella?"

"Yes, please."

I follow him inside the cabin. An L-shaped cream leather sofa is directly in front of us, and above it a massive curved window offering a panoramic view of the marina. To the left is the kitchen area – very well appointed, all pale wood.

"This is the main saloon. Galley, beside," Edward says, waving his hand in the direction of the kitchen. He takes my hand and leads me through the main cabin. It's surprisingly spacious. The floor is the same pale wood. It looks modern and sleek, and has a light airy feel, but it's all very functional – like he doesn't spend much time here.

"Bathrooms either side." Edward points to two doors, then opens the small, oddly-shaped door directly in front of us and steps in. We're in a plush bedroom. Oh… It has a kingsize cabin bed and is all pale blue linen and pale wood, like his bedroom at Escala. Edward obviously chooses a theme and sticks to it.

"This is the master cabin." He gazes down at me, green eyes glowing. "You're the first girl in here, apart from family," he smirks. "They don't count."

I flush under his heated stare, and I can feel my pulse quicken… really? Another first. He pulls me into his arms, his fingers tangling in my hair, and kisses me, long and hard. We're both breathless when he pulls away.

"Might have to christen this bed," he whispers against my mouth.

Oh… at sea!

"But not right now. Come, Mac will be casting off." And I feel a stab of disappointment as he takes my hand and leads me back through the saloon. He indicates another door.

"Office in there, and at the front here, two more cabins."

"So how many can sleep on board?"

"It's a six-berth cat. I've only ever had the family on board though. I like to sail alone. But not when you're here. I need to keep an eye on you."

He delves into a chest and pulls out a bright red lifejacket.

“Here.” Putting it over my head, he tightens all the straps, a faint smile playing on his lips.

“You love strapping me up, don’t you?”

“In any form,” he says fervently, but I know he’s joking.

“You are a pervert.”

“I know.” He raises his eyebrows and grins.

“My pervert,” I whisper.

“Yes, yours.”

Once secured, he grabs the sides of the jacket and kisses me.

“Always,” he breathes, then releases me before I have a chance to respond.

Always! Holy cow…

“Come.” He grabs my hand and leads me outside, up some steps and on to the upper deck, to a small cockpit that houses a big steering wheel and a raised seat. I can see to the prow of the boat where Mac is doing something with ropes.

“Is this where you learned all your rope tricks?” I ask Edward innocently.

“Clove hitches have come in handy,” he says, looking at me appraisingly. “Miss Swan, you sound curious. I like you curious, baby. I’d be more than happy to demonstrate what I can do with a rope.” He smirks at me.

I gaze at him impassively, as if he’s upset me, and his face falls. I grin.

“Gotcha.”

His mouth twists and he narrows his eyes at me.

“I may have to deal with you later, but right now, I’ve got to drive my boat.” He sits at the controls, presses a button, and the engines roar into life. Mac comes scooting back down the side of the boat, grinning at me, and jumps down to the deck below where he starts to unfasten a rope. Maybe he knows some rope tricks, too… the idea pops unwelcome into my head and I flush. My subconscious glares at me, and mentally I shrug at her, and glance at Edward. I blame Fifty. He picks up the receiver and radios the coastguard as Mac calls up that we are set to go.

Once more, I am dazzled by Edward's expertise. He's so competent. Is there nothing that this man can't do? Then I remember his earnest attempt to chop and dice a pepper in my apartment on Friday. The thought makes me smile.

Very slowly, Edward eases *The Esme* out of her berth and towards the marina entrance. Behind us, a small crowd has gathered on the dockside to watch our departure. Small children are waving, and I wave back. Edward glances over his shoulder, then pulls me between his legs and points out various dials and gadget in the cockpit.

"Grab the wheel," he orders, bossy as ever, but I do as I'm told. *Aye, aye Captain!* Placing his hands snugly over mine, he continues to steer our course out of the marina and within a few minutes we are out on the open sea, slap into the cold blue waters of Puget Sound. Out of the shelter of the marina's protective wall, the wind is stronger, and the sea pitches and rolls beneath us. I can't help but grin. I can feel Edward's excitement – this is such *fun*. We make a large curve until we are heading west towards the Olympic Peninsula, the wind behind us.

"Sail time," Edward says, excited. "Here – you take her. Keep her on this course."

What? He grins, reacting to the horror in my face.

"Baby, it's really easy. Hold the wheel and keep your eye on the horizon over the bow. You'll do great. You always do. When the sails go up, you'll feel the drag. Just hold her steady. I'll signal like this – " He makes a slashing motion across his throat. "And you can cut the engines. This button here." He points to a large black button. "Understand?"

"Yes," I nod frantically, feeling panicky. Jeez, I hadn't expected to *do* anything!

He kisses me very quickly as he steps off his captain's chair, then he's bounding up to the front of the boat to join Mac, where he starts unfurling sails, untying ropes, and operating winches and pulleys. They work well together, in a team, shouting various nautical terms to each other, and it's warming to see Fifty interacting with someone else in such a carefree manner. Perhaps Mac is Fifty's friend. He doesn't seem to have many, as far as I can tell, but then, I don't have many either. Well, not here in Seattle. The only friend I have is sunning herself in St. James, on the west coast of Barbados. I have a sudden pang for Rose. I am missing her, more than I thought I would when she left. I hope she changes her mind and comes home with Jasper, rather than stay on longer with Emmett.

Edward and Mac hoist the mainsail. It fills and billows out as the wind seizes it hungrily, and I can feel the boat's pull through the wheel… *Whoa!* They get to work on the headsail and I watch, fascinated, as it flies up the mast and the wind catches it, stretching it taut.

"Hold her steady baby, and cut the engines!" Edward cries out to me over the wind, motioning me to switch off the engines. I can only just hear his voice but I nod frantically,

gazing at the man I love, all windswept, exhilarated, and bracing himself against the pitch and yaw of the boat. I press the button, the roar of the engines ceases, and *The Esme* soars towards the Olympic Peninsula, skimming across the water like she's flying. I want to yell and scream and cheer. This has to be one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life. Except perhaps the glider… and maybe the red room of pain... *hmmm.*

Holy cow, this boat can move! I stand firm, grasping the wheel, fighting the rudder, and Edward is behind me once more, his hands on mine.

"What do you think?" he shouts above the sound of the wind and the sea.

"Edward! This is fantastic."

He beams at me, grinning from ear to ear.

"You wait until the spinney's up." He points with his chin towards Mac, who is unfurling the spinnaker – a sail that's a dark, rich, red. It reminds me of the walls in the playroom.

"Interesting color," I shout.

He gives me a wolfish grin and winks. Oh… it's deliberate. It balloons out – a large, odd ellipsis shape – and now *The Esme* is in overdrive, finding her head and speeding through the Sound.

"Asymmetrical sail. For speed." Edward answers my unasked question.

"It's amazing…" I can think of nothing better to say.

I have the most ridiculous grin on my face as we whip through the water, heading for the majesty of the Olympic Mountains and Bainbridge Island. Glancing back, I see Seattle shrinking behind us, Mount Rainier in the far distance. I had not really appreciated how beautiful and rugged Seattle's surrounding landscape is – verdant, lush, and temperate, tall evergreens and cliff faces jutting out here and there. It has a wild but serene beauty on this glorious sunny afternoon that takes my breath away. The stillness, compared to our speed as we whip across the water.

"How fast are we going?"

"She's doing 15 knots."

"I have no idea what that means."

"It's about 17 miles an hour."

"Is that all? It feels much faster…"

He squeezes my hands, smiling.

"You look lovely, Isabella. It's good to see some color in your cheeks – and not from blushing. You look like you do in Jake's photos."

I turn and kiss him.

"You know how to show a girl a good time, Mr. Cullen."

"We aim to please, Miss Swan." He scoops my hair out of the way and kisses the back of my neck, sending delicious tingles down my spine.

"I like seeing you happy," he breathes and tightens his arms around me.

And I gaze out over the wide blue water, wondering what I could possibly have done in a past life to have fortune smile on me in this one, and deliver this beautiful man to me. Yes, you're a lucky bitch, my subconscious snaps, but you have your work cut out with him. He's not going to want this vanilla crap forever. You're going to have to compromise. I glare mentally at her snarky, insolent face, and rest my head against Edward's chest. Deep down, I know my subconscious is right, but I banish the thoughts. I don't want to spoil my day.

An hour later, we are anchored in a small secluded cove off Bainbridge Island. Mac has gone ashore in the inflatable – for what, I don't know, but I have my suspicions because, as soon as Mac starts the outboard engine, Edward grabs my hand and practically drags me into his cabin. A man with a mission.

Now he stands before me, exuding his intoxicating sensuality as his deft fingers make quick work of the straps on my lifejacket. He tosses it to one side and gazes intently down at me, eyes dark… dilated. I am lost already and he's barely touched me. He raises his hand to my face and his fingers move down my chin, the column of my throat, my sternum, searing me with his touch, to the first button of my blue blouse.

"I want to see you," he breathes and dexterously undoes the button. Bending, he plants a soft kiss on my parted lips. I am panting and eager, aroused by the potent combination of his captivating beauty, his raw sexuality in the confines of this cabin and the gentle sway of the boat. He stands back.

"Strip for me," he whispers and cocks his head slightly to one side, eyes burning.

Oh…my. I am only too happy to comply. Not taking my eyes off his, I slowly undo each button, savoring his scorching gaze. Oh… this is heady stuff. I can see his desire – it's evident in his eyes… and elsewhere.

I let my blouse fall to the floor and reach for the button on my jeans.

"Stop," he orders softly. "Sit."

I sit down on the edge of the bed and in one fluid movement, he's on his knees in front of me. Undoing the laces of first one, then the other sneaker, pulling each off, followed by my socks. He picks up my left foot and raising it plants a soft kiss on the pad of my big toe, and then grazes his teeth against it.

"Ah!" I groan as I feel the effect deep, deep in my belly. He stands in one smooth move, holds his hand out to me, and pulls me back up off the bed.

"Continue," he says and stands back to watch me.

I gently ease the zipper of my jeans down and, hooking my thumbs in the waistband, I sashay and slide them down my legs. I can see a soft smile play on his lips, but his eyes remain dark. And I don't know if it's because he made love to me this morning, I mean really made love to me, gently, sweetly, or if it was his impassioned declaration – *yes... I do* – but I don't feel embarrassed at all. I want to be sexy for this man. He deserves sexy. He makes me feel sexy. Okay, it's new to me, but I'm learning under his expert tutelage. And then again, so much is new to him too. It balances the see-saw between us, a little, I think.

I am wearing some of my new underwear, a white lacy thong and matching bra, a designer brand with a price tag to match. I step out of my jeans and stand there for him, in the lingerie he paid for, but I no longer feel cheap. I feel his. Reaching behind, I unhook my bra, sliding the straps down my arms, and drop it on top of my blouse. Very slowly I slip my panties off, letting them fall to my ankles, and step out of them, surprised by my grace. Standing before him, I am naked and unashamed, and I know it's because he loves me. I no longer have to hide. He says nothing, just gazes at me, and I can see his desire, his adoration even, and something else. The warmth of his need. The warmth of his love for me.

He reaches down, lifts the hem of his cream sweater, and pulls it over his head, followed by his t-shirt, revealing his chest, never taking his bold green eyes off mine. His shoes and socks follow, then he grasps the button of his jeans, and I reach over.

"Let me," I whisper.

His lips purse briefly into an oooh shape, then he smiles.

“Be my guest,” he breathes and I step towards him, slip my fearless fingers inside the waistband of his jeans, and tug so he’s forced to take a step closer to me.

He gasps involuntarily at my unexpected audacity, and then smiles down at me. I undo the button with my hand, but before I unzip him, I let my hand wander, tracing his erection through the soft denim.

I can feel him flex his hips slightly into my hand and he closes his eyes briefly, obviously relishing my touch.

“You’re getting so bold, Bella… so brave,” he whispers, and clasps my face with both hands, bending to kiss me, deeply, as I put my hands on his hips, half on his cool skin and half on the low-slung waistband of his jeans.

“So are you,” I murmur against his lips, as my thumbs rub slow circles on his skin, and he smiles.

“Getting there.”

I move my hands to the front of his jeans and pull down the zipper. My intrepid fingers move through his pubic hair to his erection and I grasp him tightly in my hand.

He groans softly in my mouth, his sweet breath washing over me, and he kisses me again, lovingly. As my hand moves over him, around him, stroking him, squeezing him tightly, he puts his arms around me. His right hand is flat against the middle of my back and his fingers spread, his left hand in my hair, holding me to his mouth.

“Oh, I want you so much baby,” he breathes, and steps back suddenly to remove his jeans and boxers in one swift, agile move. He is a fine, fine sight, in or out of clothes, every single inch of him. He is perfect – except for his scars, I think sadly, and they run so much deeper than his skin.

“What’s wrong, Bella?” he breathes, and gently strokes my cheek with his knuckles.

“Nothing. Love me, now.”

He pulls me into his arms, kissing me, his hands twisting into my hair. Our tongues entwined, he walks me backwards toward the bed and gently lowers me on to it, following me down on to the mattress so that he’s lying by my side.

He runs his nose along my jaw line as my hands move to his hair.

“Do you have any idea how exquisite your scent is Bella? It’s irresistible...”

And his words do what they always do – flame my blood, quicken my pulse, and he trails his nose down my throat, across my breasts, kissing me reverentially as he does.

"You are so beautiful, Bella," he murmurs, as he takes one of my nipples in his mouth and softly suckles.

I moan as my body bows off the bed.

"Let me hear you, baby."

His hand trails down to my waist and I glory in the feel of his touch, skin to skin, his hungry mouth at my breasts and his skilled long-fingers caressing and stroking me, cherishing me. Moving over my hips, over my behind and down my leg, to my knee and all this time he's kissing and sucking at my breasts. Oh…my. Grasping my knee, he suddenly hitches my leg up, curling it over his hips, making me gasp, and I feel rather than see his responding grin against my skin. He rolls over so that I am astride him, and hands me a foil packet. I shift back, taking him in my hands, and I just can't resist him in all his glory. I bend and kiss him, then take him in my mouth, swirling my tongue around him, then sucking hard. He groans and flexes his hips so that he's deeper in my mouth. Hmmm, he tastes good. I want him inside me. I sit up and gaze at him – he's breathless, mouth open, watching me intently. Hurriedly, I tear open the condom and slowly unroll it over him. He holds out his hands for me. I take one, and with my other hand, position myself over him, then slowly claim him as mine.

He groans low in his throat, closing his eyes. And the feel of him in me, stretching, filling me… I moan softly. It's divine. He places his hands on my hips and moves me – up, down – and he pushes into me. Oh, it's so good.

"Oh, baby," he whispers and suddenly he sits up, so we're nose to nose, and the sensation is extraordinary – so full. I gasp, grabbing on to his upper arms, as he clasps my head in his hands and gazes into my eyes, his intense, jade green, burning.

"Oh, Bella. What you make me feel," he murmurs and kisses me, passionately, so I can feel his fervent ardor. I kiss him back, dizzy with the delicious feeling of him buried deep inside me.

"Oh… I love you," I murmur.

And he groans, as if pained to hear my whispered words, and rolls over, taking me with him, not breaking this precious contact, so now I am lying beneath him. I wrap my legs around his waist. He stares down at me with adoring wonder, and I am sure I mirror his expression as I reach up to caress his beautiful face. Very slowly he starts to move, closing his eyes as he does, and groaning softly. The gentle sway of the boat, the peace and quiet tranquility of the cabin, broken only by our mingled breaths as he moves slowly in and out

of me, so controlled… and so good. It's all heavenly. He puts his arm around my head, his hand on my hair, and with the other hand caresses my face as he bends to kiss me. I feel cocooned by him, as he loves me, moving slowly, in and out, savoring me. I touch him, sticking to the boundaries – his arms, his hair, his lower back, his beautiful behind – and my breathing accelerates as his steady rhythm pushes me higher and higher. He's kissing my mouth, my chin, my jaw, then nibbling my ear. I can hear his staccato breaths with each gentle thrust of his body.

My body starts to quiver. Oh, this feeling that I now know so well… I am close.

"Oh, that's right baby… Give it up for me… please, Bella," he murmurs and his words are my undoing.

"And you for me," I cry, and he groans as we both come together.

"Mac will be back soon," he murmurs.

"Hmmm." My eyes flicker open to meet his soft green gaze. Lord, his eyes are an amazing color – especially here, out on the sea – reflecting the light bouncing off the water through the small portholes into the cabin.

"As much as I'd like to lie here with you all afternoon, he'll need a hand with the dinghy." Edward smiles and leaning over kisses me tenderly. "Oh Bella, you look so beautiful right now, all mussed up and sexy. Makes me want you more." Rising from the bed he drags on his boxers, and I sit up to admire the view.

"You ain't so bad yourself, Captain." I smack my lips admiringly and he grins at me. I watch him move gracefully about the cabin as he dresses. He really is divinely beautiful, and he's mine, and he's just made such sweet love to me… again. I am beyond lucky. He sits down beside me to put on his shoes.

"Captain, eh?" he says dryly. "Well, I am master of this vessel."

"You are master of my heart, Mr. Cullen." I cock my head to one side.

And my body… and my soul.

He shakes his head incredulously, and bends to kiss me.

"I'll be on deck. There's a shower in the ensuite if you want one. Do you need anything? A drink?" he asks solicitously, and all I can do is grin at him. Is this the same man? Is this the same Fifty?

“What?” he says, reacting to my stupid grin.

“You.”

“What about me?”

“Who are you and what have you done with Edward?”

He lips twitch with a sad smile.

“Oh, he’s not very far away, baby,” he says softly, and there’s a touch of melancholy in his voice that makes me instantly regret saying it. But he shakes it off. “You’ll see him soon enough.” He smirks at me. “Especially if you don’t get up.” Reaching over, he smacks me hard on my behind, so I yelp and laugh at the same time.

“You had me worried.”

“Did I now? Well, that’s very interesting, Miss Swan.” Edward’s brow creases slightly. “You do give off some mixed signals, Isabella. How’s a man supposed to keep up?” He leans down and kisses me again.

“Laters, baby.” With a dazzling smile he gets up and leaves me to my thoroughly scattered thoughts.

When I surface on deck, Mac is back on board, but he disappears onto the upper deck as I open the saloon doors. Edward is on his BlackBerry – talking to whom, I wonder? He wanders over to me and pulls me close, kissing my hair.

“Great news… good. Yeah… Really? The stairwell? … Between seven and eight.”

He hits the off button, and the sound of the engines firing up startles me. Mac must be in the cockpit above.

“Time to head back,” Edward says, kisses me once more, and starts strapping me into my lifejacket.

On our way back to the marina, with the sun low in the sky behind us, I reflect on a wonderful afternoon. Under Edward’s careful, patient tuition, I have now stowed a mainsail, a headsail and a spinnaker, and learned to tie a reef knot, clove hitch, and sheepshank. His lips were twitching throughout the lesson.

"I may tie you up one day," I mutter mulishly.

His mouth twists with humor.

"You'll have to catch me first, Miss Swan."

His words bring to mind him chasing me around the apartment, and the thrill I felt, and what came after. I frown and then shudder. After that I left him. Would I leave him again? I gaze up into his clear green eyes, and he's so much more open. Could I ever leave him again – no matter what he did to me? Could I betray him like that? I really don't think I could.

He's given me a more thorough tour of this beautiful boat, explaining all the innovative designs and techniques, and the high-quality materials used to build it. I remember the interview when I first met him… I picked up then on his passion for ships. I thought his love was only for the ocean-going freighters his company builds – not for super, sexy, sleek catamarans too.

And, of course, he's made sweet, unhurried love to me, again. I shake my head, remembering my body bowed and wanting beneath his expert hands. He really is an exceptional lover, I'm sure, though of course I have no comparison. But Rose would have raved more if it was always like this. It's not like her to hold back on details. But how long will this be enough? I just don't know, and the thought is unnerving. Now he sits, and I stand in the safe circle of his arms, for an age, it seems, in comfortable, companiable silence as *The Esme* glides closer and closer to Seattle. I have the wheel, Edward advising on adjustments every so often.

"There is poetry in sailing as old as the world," he murmurs in my ear.

"That sounds like a quote."

I can feel his grin. "It is. Antoine de Saint-Exupery."

"Oh… I adore *The Little Prince*."

"Me too."

It is early evening as Edward, his hands still on mine, steers us in to the marina. There are lights winking from the boats and reflecting off the dark water, but it is still light – a balmy, bright evening. An overture for what is sure to be a spectacular sunset.

A crowd gathers on the dockside as Edward slowly but surely turns the boat around in a relatively small space. He does it with ease and reverses smoothly in to the same berth we left earlier. Mac jumps on to the pontoon and ties *The Esme* securely to a bollard.

"Back again," Edward murmurs softly against my ear.

"Thank you," I murmur shyly. "That was a perfect afternoon."

Edward grins.

"I thought so, too. Perhaps we can enroll you into a sailing school, so we can go out for a few days… just the two of us."

"I'd love that. We can christen the bedroom again and again…"

He leans forward and kisses me under my ear.

"Hmmm… I look forward to it, Isabella," he whispers seductively making every single hair follicle on my body stand to attention. How does he do that?

"Come. The apartment is clean, we can go back."

"What about our things at the hotel?"

"Taylor has collected them already."

Oh! When… how?

"Earlier today, after he did a sweep of *The Esme* with his team," Edward answers my unspoken question.

"Does that poor man ever sleep?"

"He sleeps." Edward quirks an eyebrow at me, puzzled. "He's just doing his job, Isabella, which he's very good at. Ben is a real find."

"Ben?"

"Ben Taylor."

I'd thought Taylor was his first name. Ben… It suits him – solid, reliable. For some reason, it makes me smile.

Edward eyes me speculatively.

"You're fond of Taylor."

"Well, yes… I suppose I am."

He frowns at me.

"I'm not attracted to him, if that's why you're frowning. Stop."

Edward is almost pouting – sulky. Oh jeez, he's such a child sometimes.

"I think Taylor looks after you very well. That's why I like him. He seems kind, reliable, and loyal. He has an avuncular appeal to me."

"Avuncular?"

"Yes."

"Okay… avuncular." Edward is testing the word and meaning.

I laugh.

"Oh, Edward, grow up, for heaven's sake."

His mouth drops open, surprised by my outburst, but then he frowns as if considering my statement.

"I'm trying," he says eventually.

"That you are. Very," I answer softly, but then roll my eyes at him.

He grins.

"What memories you evoke when you roll your eyes at me, Isabella."

I smirk at him.

"Well, if you behave yourself, maybe we can relive some of those memories."

His mouth twists with humor, and he raises his eyebrows.

"Behave myself? Really, Miss Swan, what makes you think I want to relive them?"

"Probably the way your eyes lit up like Christmas when I said that."

“You know me so well already,” he says dryly.

“I’d like to know you better.”

He smiles softly. “And I you, Isabella…”

Chapter 70

"Thanks, Mac." Edward shakes McConnell's hand and steps on the pontoon.

"Always a pleasure Mr. Cullen, and goodbye, Bella. Lovely to meet you."

I shake his hand, shyly. He must know what Edward and I were up to on the boat while he went ashore.

"Good day Mac, and thank you." He grins at me and winks, making me flush. Edward takes my hand and we walk up the pontoon to the marina's promenade.

"Where's Mac from?" I ask, curious about his accent.

"Ireland… Northern Ireland," Edward corrects himself.

"There's a difference?"

Edward glances down at me.

"Oh yes, baby, you better believe it."

"Is he your friend?"

"Mac? No. He works for me. Helped build *The Esme*."

"Do you have many friends?"

He frowns.

"Not really. Doing what I do, I don't cultivate friendships. There's only – "

He stops, his frown deepening, and I know he was going to mention Mrs. Robinson.

"Hungry?" he asks, trying to change the subject.

I nod. Actually, I'm famished.

"We'll eat where I left the car. Come."

Next to SP's is a small Italian bistro called Rene's. It reminds me of the place in Portland – a few tables and booths, the décor very crisp and modern, with a large black and white photograph of a turn-of-the-century fiesta serving as a mural. Edward and I are seated in a booth poring over the menu and sipping a delicious light Frascati. When I glance up from the menu, having made my choice, Edward is gazing at me speculatively.

"What?" I ask.

"You look very lovely, Isabella. The outdoors agrees with you."

I flush.

"I feel rather wind-burned to tell the truth. But I had a lovely afternoon. A perfect afternoon. Thank you."

He smiles softly at me, his eyes warm.

"My pleasure," he murmurs.

"Can I ask you something?" I decide on a fact-finding mission.

"Anything, Isabella. You know that." He cocks his head to one side, looking delicious.

"You don't seem to have many friends. Why is that?"

He shrugs and frowns slightly.

"I told you, I don't really have time. I have business associates, though that's very different to friendships I suppose. I have my family and that's it. Apart from Irina."

I ignore the mention of the bitch-troll.

"No male friends of your own age? That you can go out with and let off steam?"

Edward's mouth twists and he looks puzzled.

"You know how I like to let off steam, Isabella. And I've been working, building up the business. That's all I do, except sail and fly occasionally."

"Not even in college?"

"Not really."

"So just Irina then?"

He nods, and suddenly looks wary.

“Must be lonely.”

He smiles, wistfully.

“What would you like to eat?” he asks, changing the subject again.

“I’m going for the risotto.”

“Good choice.”

Edward summons the waiter, putting an end to that conversation. After we’ve placed our order, I shift uncomfortably in my seat, staring at my knotted fingers. If he’s in a talking mood I need to take advantage. I have to talk to him about his expectations, about his, um… needs.

“Isabella, what’s wrong? Tell me.”

I glance up into his concerned face.

“Tell me,” he says more forcefully and his concern evolves into what… fear? Anger?

“I’m just worried… that this isn’t enough for you. You know, to… let off steam.”

I can see his jaw tense and his eyes harden slightly.

“Have I given you any indication that this isn’t enough?”

“Well, no…”

“Then why do you think that?”

“I know what you’re like. What you… um… need,” I say quietly.

He closes his eyes and rubs his forehead with this long fingers.

“What do I have to do?” he asks. His voice is ominously soft, as if he’s angry, and my heart sinks.

“No, you misunderstand. You’re doing amazingly, and I know it’s just been a few days, but… I just hope that I’m not forcing you to be someone you’re not.”

"I'm still me, Isabella, in all my fifty shades of fucked-upness. Yes, I have to fight the urge to be controlling, but that's my nature, how I've dealt with my life. Yes, I want to punish you sometimes. For example, at the ball, with your auction bid. That's the way I am," he says quietly. "I don't think that will ever go, but I'm trying, and it's not as hard as I thought it would be. I mean, you let me spank you yesterday. After the bid, anyway." He smiles far too fondly at the memory.

Oh, yes… hmmm. After the silver balls. I squirm in my seat and flush, but smile shyly back at him.

"I didn't mind that," I whisper quietly.

"I know. But frankly, Isabella, these last few days have been the best in my life. I don't want to change anything."

Oh! Best in my life too, without exception. My inner goddess nods frantically in agreement, and nudges me hard. Okay, okay...

"So you don't want to take me into your playroom?"

He swallows and pales, all humor gone.

"No, I don't."

"Why not?" I whisper. This is not the answer I expected, and yes, there it is, that little pinch of disappointment. My inner goddess stomps off pouting, her arms crossed like an angry toddler.

"Because the last time we were in there you left me," he says quietly. "I will naturally shy away from anything that could possibly make you leave me again. I was devastated when you left. I explained that. I never want to feel like that again, ever. I've told you how I feel about you."

I flush.

"Yes, but that hardly seems fair. It can't be very relaxing for you, to be constantly concerned about how I feel. You've made all these changes for me, and I… I think I should reciprocate in some way. I don't know, maybe try some role-playing games," I stutter, my face as crimson as the walls of the playroom. Why is this stuff so hard to talk about? I have done all manner of kinky fuckery with this man, things I hadn't even heard of a few weeks ago, things that I would never thought possible, yet the hardest of all is talking to him.

"Bella, you do reciprocate, more than you know. Please, please don't feel like this."

Gone is carefree Edward. I can see alarm in his eyes, and it's gut wrenching. "Baby, it's only been one weekend," he continues. "Give us some time. I thought a great deal about this, last week, when you left. We need some time. You need to trust me, and I you. Maybe in time we can indulge, but I like how you are now. I like seeing you this happy, this relaxed and free, knowing that I had something to do with it. I have never – " he stops and runs his hand through his hair. "We have to walk before we can run."

Suddenly, he smirks.

"What's so funny?"

"Banner. He says that all the time. I never thought I'd be quoting him."

"A Bannerism."

Edward laughs. "Exactly."

The waiter arrives with our starters – Bruschetta – and our conversation changes tack. But as the unfeasibly large plates are placed before us, I can't help but think that this is the way I have thought of Edward today – relaxed, happy, carefree. And at least he's laughing now, at ease again. I breathe an inward sigh of relief as he starts quizzing me about places I've been. This is a short discussion, since I have never been anywhere, except within the US. Edward on the other hand has traveled the world and we slip into an easier, happier conversation, talking about all the places he's visited.

After our scrumptious and filling meal, Edward drives us back to Escala, Eva Cassidy's gentle sweet voice singing over the speakers. It allows me a peaceful interlude in which to think. I have had a mind-blowing day: Dr. Greene, our shower, making love at the hotel and on the boat, buying the car… and Edward… so different. Like he's letting go of something, or rediscovering something – I just don't know. Who knew he could be so sweet? Did he? When I glance at him he too looks lost in thought. It strikes me there and then that he never really had an adolescence – a normal one, anyway. I shake my head. So much to think about. My mind drifts back to the ball, and dancing with Dr. Banner, and Edward's fear that Banner had told me all about him. He's still hiding something from me. How can we move on if he feels that way? He thinks I might leave if I know him. Thinks that I might leave if he's himself. Oh, this is such a difficult circle to square. He's so complicated.

As we get closer to his home, I can feel his tension build in the car until it becomes palpable. He starts scanning the sidewalks and side alleys, his eyes darting everywhere, and I know he's looking for Lauren. I start looking, too. Every young brunette is a suspect, but we don't see her. When he pulls into the garage, his mouth is set in a grim line, and I can

see that the Volvo is gone. I wonder briefly why we've come back here if he's going to be so wary and uptight. Stuart is in the garage, patrolling. He comes to open my door as Edward parks up.

"Hello, Stuart," I murmur my greeting.

"Miss Swan," he nods. "Mr. Cullen."

"No sign?" Edward asks.

"No, Sir."

Edward nods, grasps my hand, and heads for the elevator. I can tell his brain is working overtime; he seems distracted. Once we're inside, he turns to me.

"You are not allowed out of here alone. You understand?" he snaps at me.

"Okay…" Jeez, keep your hair on.

But his attitude makes me smile. I want to hug myself. Now *this* man, all domineering and short with me, I know. I marvel that I would have found it so threatening only a week or so ago, when he spoke to me this way. But now I understand him so much better. This is his coping mechanism. He's stressed out about Lauren, and he loves me, and he wants to protect me.

"What's so funny?" he murmurs and I can see a hint of amusement in his expression.

"You are."

"Me? Miss Swan, why am I funny?" He pouts.

Edward pouting is… hot.

"Don't pout."

"Why?" He's even more amused.

"Because it has the same effect on me as I have on you when I do this." I bite my lip deliberately. He raises his eyebrows, surprised and pleased at the same time.

"Really?" He pouts again, and leans down to kiss me, a swift chaste kiss. I raise my lips to meet his and in the nanosecond in which our lips touch, the nature of the kiss changes. Wildfire spreads through my veins from this intimate point of contact, propelling me to him. I gasp, and suddenly my fingers are curling in his hair, as he grabs me and pushes me

against the elevator wall. His hand frames around my face, holding me to his lips as our tongues thrash against each other. I don't know if it's the confines of the elevator making everything so much more real, but I can feel his need, his worry, his passion. Holy shit. I want him, here, now. The elevator pings to a halt, the doors slide open, and Edward drags his face from mine, his hips still pinning me to the wall. I can feel his erection.

"Whoa," he murmurs panting.

"Whoa," I mirror him, dragging in a deep breath.

He gazes down at me, green eyes blazing.

"Oh, what you do to me, Bella." And he traces my lower lip with his thumb.

Out of the corner of my eye, I can see Taylor in the foyer step backwards so he's no longer staring at us. I reach up and gently kiss Edward at the corner of his beautifully sculptured mouth.

"What you do to me, Edward."

He steps back and takes my hand, his eyes darker now, hooded.

"Come," he orders.

Taylor is still in the foyer.

"Good evening, Taylor," Edward says cordially.

"Mr. Cullen, Miss Swan."

"I was Mrs. Taylor, yesterday," I grin up at Taylor, and he flushes slightly.

Edward scowls down at me.

"That has a nice ring to it, Miss Swan," Taylor says matter-of-factly.

"I thought so, too."

Edward grabs my hand. "Well, if you two have quite finished, I'd like a debrief." He glares at Taylor, who now looks very uncomfortable, and I cringe inwardly. I know I have overstepped the mark.

"Sorry," I mouth at Taylor, who shrugs and smiles kindly before I turn to follow Edward.

"I'll be with you shortly, I just want a word with Miss Swan," Edward says to Taylor, and I know I am in trouble. *Oh no.*

Edward leads me into his bedroom and closes the door.

"Don't flirt with the staff, Isabella," he scolds me.

I flush, and open my mouth to defend myself, then close it again. Then open it.

"I wasn't flirting. I was being friendly. There is a difference."

"Don't be friendly with the staff or flirt with them. I don't like it."

Oh. Goodbye, carefree Edward.

"I'm sorry," I mutter and stare down at my fingers. He hasn't made me feel like a child for so long.

Reaching down, he cups my chin, pulling my head up to meet his eyes.

"You know how jealous I am," he whispers.

"You have no reason to be jealous, Edward. You own me body and soul."

He blinks down at me, as if he's finding this fact hard to process. He leans down and kisses me quickly, but with none of the passion we experienced a moment ago in the elevator.

"I won't be long. Make yourself at home," he says sulkily and turns, leaving me standing in his bedroom, feeling… confused. I glance at the alarm clock. It's just after eight. I should get some clothes ready for work tomorrow. I head upstairs to my room and open the walk-in closet. It's empty. All the clothes have gone. *Oh no!* Edward's taken me at my word, and disposed of the clothes. Oh, shit. My subconscious glares at me – well, that will be you and your big mouth. Why did he take me at my word? And my mother's advice comes back to haunt me. *Men are so literal, darling.* I pout, staring at the empty space. There were some lovely clothes, too… the green dress. I wander disconsolately into the bedroom. And all my stuff has gone from there, too. Wait a moment – what is going on? Where's my Mac? I hurtle back downstairs, back into Edward's bedroom, and it's all in here, my Mac on the beside table. I open the walk-in closet door. My clothes are here. *Oh my.* Everything, sharing space with Edward's clothes. When did this happen? Why does he never warn me before he does stuff like this?

I turn, and he's standing in the doorway.

"Oh – they managed the move," he mutters, distracted.

“What’s wrong?” I ask. His face is grim.

“Taylor thinks Lauren was getting in through the stairwell. She must have a key to the emergency exit. All the locks have been changed now. Taylor’s team has done a sweep of every room in the apartment, with a thermal imaging camera. She’s not here. I just wish I knew where she was. She’s evading all our attempts to find her – when she needs help.” He frowns, and my earlier pique vanishes. I move closer and put my arms around him. Folding me into his embrace, he kisses my hair.

“What will you do when you find her?” I ask.

“Dr. Banner has a place.”

“What about her husband?”

“He’s washed his hands of her.” Edward’s voice is bitter. “Her family is in Connecticut. I think she’s very much on her own out here.”

“Oh…”

“Are you okay with all your stuff being here? I want you to share my room,” he murmurs.

Whoa… quick change of direction.

“Yes.”

“I want you sleeping with me. I don’t have nightmares when you’re with me.”

“You have nightmares?”

“Yes.”

“Oh…” I tighten my hold around him. Holy cow... more baggage. My heart constricts for this man.

“I was just getting stuff ready for work tomorrow,” I mutter.

“Work!” Edward exclaims, like it’s a dirty word, and he releases me, glaring down at me.

“Yes, work,” I reply, confused by his extreme reaction. He stares at me with complete incomprehension.

“But Lauren, she’s out there…” he pauses. “I don’t want you to go to work.”

What?

“That’s ridiculous, Edward. I have to go work.”

“No, you don’t.”

“I have a new job, which I enjoy. Of course I have to go to work.” What does he mean?

“No, you don’t,” he repeats, emphatically.

“Do you think I am going to stay here twiddling my thumbs while you’re off being Master of the Universe?”

“Well frankly… yes.”

Oh, Fifty, Fifty, Fifty. Give me strength.

“Edward, I need to go to work.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Yes. I. Do.” I say it slowly, like he’s a child.

He scowls at me. “It’s not safe.”

“Edward, I need to work for a living, and I’ll be fine.”

“No, you don’t need to work for a living, and how do you know you’ll be fine?” He’s almost shouting.

What does he mean? He’s going to support me? Oh, this is just beyond ridiculous. I've known him for what... five weeks? He’s angry now, his green eyes flashing at me, but I don’t give a shit.

“For Heaven’s sake Edward, Lauren was standing at the end of your bed and she didn’t harm me, and yes, I do need to work. I don’t want to be beholden to you. I have my student loans to pay.”

His mouth presses into a grim line as I place my hands on my hips. I am so not budging on this. Who the fuck does he think he is?

“I don’t want you going to work.”

“It’s not up to you, Edward. This is not your decision to make.”

He runs his hand through his hair as he stares at me. Seconds, minutes tick by as we glare at each other.

"Stuart will come with you."

"Edward, that's not necessary. You're being irrational."

"Irrational?" He glowers at me. "Either he comes with you, or I will be really irrational, and keep you here."

He wouldn't… would he?

"How, exactly?"

"Oh I would, Isabella. Don't push me."

"Okay!" I concede, holding up both my hands, placating him. Holy fuck. Fifty is back with a vengeance.

And we stand there, scowling at each other. "Okay, Stuart can come with me, if it makes you feel better." I roll my eyes at him, and he narrows his eyes at me, taking a menacing step in my direction.

I immediately step back. He stops and takes a deep breath, closes his eyes and runs both his hands through his hair. Oh, Fifty is well and truly wound up.

"Shall I give you a tour?"

A tour? Are you kidding me?

"Okay," I mutter warily. Another change of tack. Mr. Mercurial is back in town.

He holds out his hand to me. When I take it, he squeezes mine softly.

"I didn't mean to frighten you."

"You didn't. I was just getting ready to run," I quip.

"Run?" Edward looks panicked.

"Joking!" Oh *Jeez.*

He leads me out of the closet, and I take a moment to try and calm down. Adrenaline is still coursing through my body. A fight with Fifty is not to be undertaken lightly.

He leads me around the apartment, showing me the various rooms. I am intrigued to find that Taylor and Mrs. Cope have rooms upstairs – a kitchen, living area and a bedroom each. Mrs. Cope has not yet returned from visiting her sister, who lives in Portland, of all places.

The room that really catches my eye is opposite his study – a TV room, with a too-large plasma screen and assorted games consoles.

"Oh… so you do have an Xbox?" I smirk.

"Yes, but I'm crap at it. Emmett always beats me. That was very funny, when you thought I meant this room was my playroom." He smiles down at me, his snit forgotten… for the moment. Thank heavens he's recovered his good mood.

"Well, I'm glad you find me amusing, Mr. Cullen," I respond haughtily.

He grins at me.

"That you are, Miss Swan. When you're not being exasperating, of course."

"I'm usually exasperating when you're being unreasonable."

"Me? Unreasonable?"

"Yes, Mr. Cullen. Unreasonable could be your middle name."

"I don't have a middle name."

"Well, Unreasonable would suit then."

"I think that's a matter of opinion, Miss Swan."

"I would be interested in Dr. Banner's professional opinion."

Edward smirks at me.

"Come," he commands.

I follow him out of the TV room, through the great room to the main corridor, past the utility room and an impressive wine cellar to Taylor's own large, well-equipped office. Taylor stands when we enter. There's even room in here for a meeting table that seats six. Above one desk is a bank of monitors. I had no idea the apartment had CCTV. It appears to monitor the balcony, stairwell, service lift, and foyer.

"Hi Taylor, I'm just giving Isabella a tour."

Taylor nods, but doesn't smile. I wonder if he's been told off, too. Why is he still working? When I smile shyly at him he nods politely.

Eventually we end up outside the library.

"And of course you've been in here…" Edward opens the door.

I spy the green baize of the billiard table.

"Shall we play?" I ask.

Edward smiles, looking surprised.

"Okay. Have you played before?"

"A few times," I lie, and he narrows his eyes at me, cocking his head to one side.

"You're a hopeless liar, Isabella. Either you've never played before or…"

I lick my lips.

"Frightened of a little competition?"

"Frightened of a little girl like you?" Edward scoffs good-naturedly.

"A wager, Mr. Cullen."

"You're that confident, Miss Swan?" He smirks at me, genuinely amused. "What would you like to wager?"

"If I win, you'll take me back into the playroom."

He gazes at me as if he can't quite comprehend what I've said.

"And if I win?" he asks after several shell-shocked beats.

"Then it's your choice."

His mouth twists as he contemplates his answer.

"Okay, deal," he says warily. "Do you want to play pool, English snooker, or carom billiards?"

"Pool, please. I don't know the others."

From a cupboard beneath one of the bookshelves, Edward takes a large leather case. Inside are pool balls nested in velvet. He sets them up in their triangle, quickly and efficiently on the baize. I don't think I've ever played pool on such a large table before.

Edward hands me a cue and some chalk.

"Would you like to break?" He feigns politeness. He's enjoying himself… He thinks he's going to win.

"Okay."

I chalk the end of my cue, and blow the excess chalk off, staring up at Edward, through my lashes. His eyes darken as I do. I line up on the white ball and with a swift clean stroke, hit the center ball of the triangle square on, with such force that a striped ball plunges quickly into the top right pocket. I've scattered the rest of the balls.

"I choose stripes," I say innocently, smiling coyly at Edward.

His mouth twists in amusement.

"Be my guest," he says politely.

I proceed to pocket the next three balls in quick succession. Inside, I am dancing. At this moment, I am so grateful to Jake for teaching me to play pool and play it well. Edward watches impassively, giving nothing away, but his amusement seems to ebb.

I miss the green stripe by a hairsbreadth.

"You know, Isabella. I could stand here and watch you leaning and stretching across this billiard table all day," he says appreciatively.

I flush. Thank heavens I am wearing my jeans. He smirks. He's trying to put me off my game, the bastard. He pulls his cream sweater over his head, tosses it onto the back of a chair, and grinning at me, saunters over to take his first shot. He bends low over the table. My mouth goes dry. Oh, I see what he means. Edward in tight jeans and white t-shirt, bending… like that… is something to behold. I quite lose my train of thought. He pockets four solids rapidly, then fouls by pocketing the white.

"Oh, a very elementary mistake, Mr. Cullen," I tease.

He smirks at me.

"Ah Miss Swan, I am but a foolish mortal. Your go, I believe."

He waves at the table.

“You’re not trying to lose are you?”

“Oh no. For what I have in mind as the prize... I want to win, Isabella." He shrugs casually. "But then, I always want to win.”

I narrow my eyes at him. Right, then… I’m so glad I’m wearing my blue blouse, which is pleasingly low-cut.

I stalk around the table, bending low at every available opportunity, giving Edward an eyeful of my behind and my cleavage whenever I can. Two can play at that game. I glance at him.

“I know what you’re doing,” he whispers, his eyes dark.

I cock my head coquettishly to one side, gently fondling my cue, running my hand up and down it gently.

“Oh, I'm just deciding where to take my next shot,” I murmur distractedly.

Leaning across, I hit the orange stripe into a better position, then stand directly in front of Edward and take the rest from underneath the table. I line up my next shot, leaning right over the table.

I hear Edward’s sharp intake of breath, and of course I miss. *Shit.*

He comes to stand behind me while I am still bent over the table, and places his hand on backside. Hmmm….

“Are you waving this around to taunt me, Miss Swan?”

And he slaps me, hard.

I gasp.

“Yes,” I mutter… because it’s true.

“Be careful what you wish for, baby.”

I rub my behind as he wanders to the other end of the table, leans over, and takes his shot. Jeez, I could look at him all day. He hits the red solid and it shoots into the left side pocket. He aims for the yellow, top right, and it just misses.

I grin.

“Red room here we come,” I taunt him.

He merely raises an eyebrow at me, and directs me to continue. I make quick work of the green stripe and by some fluke, manage to knock in the final orange stripe.

“Name your pocket,” Edward murmurs, and it’s like he’s talking about something else. Something dark and rude.

“Top left-hand.”

I take aim over the black, hit it, but miss. It skirts wide. Damn.

Edward smiles a wicked grin at me as he leans over the table and makes short work of the two remaining solids. I am practically panting, watching him, his lithe body stretching over the table. He stands and chalks his cue, his eyes burning at me.

“If I win…”

Oh, yes.

“I'm going to spank you over this table, then fuck you over it.”

Holy shit. Every single muscle in my belly tightens, hard.

“Top right,” he murmurs, pointing to the black, and bends to take the shot.

Chapter 71

With ease and grace, Edward taps the white ball so that it glides across the table, kisses the black, and the black slowly… oh so slowly… rolls towards, teeters on the edge, and finally drops into the top right pocket of the billiard table.

Damn.

He stands, and his mouth twists in a triumphant I-so-own-you-Swan smile. Putting down his cue, he saunters casually towards me, all tousled hair, jeans and white t-shirt. He doesn't look like a CEO – he looks like a bad boy from the wrong side of the tracks. Holy cow he's so fucking sexy.

"You're not going to be a sore loser are you?" he murmurs, barely containing his grin.

"Depends how hard you spank me," I whisper, holding on to my cue for support. He takes my cue and puts it to one side, hooks his finger into the top of my blouse, and pulls me towards him.

"Well, let's count your misdemeanors, Miss Swan: making me jealous of my own staff, arguing with me about working, and waving your delectable derriere at me for the last twenty minutes." His green eyes glow with excitement and leaning down, he rubs his nose against mine. "I want you to take your jeans and this very fetching blouse off. Now," he breathes and kisses me lightly, on my lips. He releases me, wanders nonchalantly over to the door, and locks it.

Oh my…

When he turns and gazes at me his eyes are burning. I stand paralyzed, like a complete zombie, my heart pounding, my blood pumping, but not actually able to move a muscle. In my mind, all I can think is: this is for him, like a mantra, over and over again.

"Clothes, Isabella. You appear to still be wearing them. Take them off, or I will do it for you."

"You do it." I finally find my voice and it sounds low and heated.

Edward grins.

"Oh, Miss Swan. It's a dirty job, but I think I can rise to the challenge."

"You normally rise to most challenges, Mr. Cullen." I raise an eyebrow at him and he smirks at me.

"Why, Miss Swan, whatever do you mean?"

He pauses on his way over to me at the small desk built into one of the bookshelves. Reaching over, he picks up a twelve inch Perspex ruler. He holds each end and flexes it as he gazes at me.

Holy shit… his weapon of choice. My mouth goes dry. Suddenly, I feel hot and bothered and damp in all the right places. Only Edward could turn me on with just a look, and the flex of a ruler. He slips it into the back pocket of his jeans and ambles towards me, eyes dark and full of promise. Without saying a word, he drops to his knees in front of me and starts to undo my laces, quickly and efficiently, dragging both my Converse and socks off. I lean on the side of the billiard table so I don't fall. Gazing down at him, I marvel at the depth of feeling that I have for this beautiful flawed man. I love him.

He grabs my hips, slips his fingers into the waistband of my jeans, and undoes the button and zipper. He peers up at me through his long lashes, grinning his most salacious grin, as he slowly peels them off. I step out of them, so glad that I am wearing these pretty, pretty panties, and he grasps the back of my legs and runs his nose along the apex of my thighs. I practically melt there and then.

"I want to be quite rough with you, Bella. You'll have to tell me to stop if it's too much," he breathes.

Oh… my. He kisses me *there.*

I moan softly.

"Safe word?" I breathe.

"No, not safe word, just tell me to stop and I'll stop. Understand?" he breathes against me and kisses me again, nuzzling me. Oh, that feels good. He stands and stares intently down at me.

"Answer me," he orders softly.

"Yes, yes… I understand." I am puzzled by his insistence.

"You've been dropping hints and giving me mixed signals all day Isabella," he breathes. "You said you were worried I had lost my edge. I'm not sure what you meant by that, and I don't know how serious you were, but we're going to find out. I don't want to go back into the playroom yet, so we can try some stuff now, but if you don't like it, you must promise

to tell me." His earlier cockiness has been replaced by a burning intensity – holy cow – born of anxiety. No, please don't be anxious, Edward.

"No safe word," I reiterate to reassure him.

"We're lovers, Isabella. Lovers don't need safe words." He frowns. "Do they?"

"I guess not," I murmur. Jeez – how do I know? "I promise."

He gazes at me once more, searching my face for any clue that I might lack the courage of my convictions, and I am nervous, but excited too. I am much happier to do this, knowing that he loves me. It's very simple to me, and right now, I really don't want to over think it.

A slow smile stretches across his face and he starts to unbutton my blouse, his deft fingers making short work of it, though he doesn't take it off. He leans over and picks up the cue. Oh fuck, what's he going to do with that? I feel a small frisson of fear run through me.

"Why don't you pocket the black? You play very well, Miss Swan. I must say I'm surprised." My fear forgotten, I wonder why the hell he should be surprised – sexy, arrogant bastard. I pout at him. He grins as he hands me the cue, then wanders down to the top right pocket and retrieves the black ball. He lines it up on the green baize, leans down and takes his shoes and socks off, his eyes never leaving mine. My inner goddess is limbering up in the background, doing her floor exercises, a great fat smile on her face.

I line up the white ball. Edward strolls back around the table and comes to stand right behind me as I lean over to take my shot. He places his hand on my right thigh, and runs his hand up and down my leg, up to my behind and back again, lightly stroking me.

"I'm going to miss if you keep doing that," I whisper, then close my eyes and relish the feel of his hands on me.

"I don't care if you hit or miss, baby. I just wanted to see you like this… stretched out on my billiard table, with practically no clothes. Do you have any idea how sexy you look at the moment?"

I flush, and my inner goddess grabs a rose between her teeth and starts to tango. Taking a deep breath, I try to ignore him and line up my shot. Impossible. He caresses my behind over and over again…

"Top left," I murmur, then hit the white ball, and he smacks me hard, squarely on my backside. It's so unexpected, I yelp. The white hits the black, which bounces off the cushion wide of the pocket. Edward caresses my behind again.

"Oh, I think you need to try that again," he whispers. "You should concentrate, Isabella."

I am panting now, excited by this game. He strolls to the end of the table and sets up the black ball again, then runs the white ball back down to me. He looks so carnal – dark eyed, lascivious smile. Oh my. How can I resist this man? I can't. I catch the ball and line it up, ready to strike again.

"Uh-uh," he admonishes. "Just wait."

Oh, he just loves prolonging the agony. He wanders back and stands behind me again. I close my eyes once more as he strokes my left thigh this time, then fondles my backside again.

"Take aim," he breathes.

I can't help the moan that escapes, and desire twists the muscles in my belly. I try, really try, to think about where I should hit the black with the white. I shift slightly to my right, and he follows me. I bend over the table once more. Using every last vestige of inner strength – which has diminished considerably, since I know what will happen once I strike the white ball – I take aim and hit the white again. Ow! Edward smacks me once more, hard. I miss again.

Oh no! I groan.

"Once more, baby. And if you miss this time – I'm really going to let you have it."

What? Have what?

He lines up the black ball once more, and walks, achingly slowly, back to me... until he's standing behind me, caressing my backside again.

"You can do it," he coaxes.

Oh, not when you're distracting me like this. I push my ass back against his hand, and he smacks me lightly.

"Eager, Miss Swan?" he murmurs.

Yes… *I want you.*

"Well, let's get rid of these." He gently slides my panties down my thighs and off. I can't see what he does with them. I feel very exposed as he plants a soft kiss on each cheek.

"Take the shot, baby."

I feel like whimpering. This is so not going to happen – I know I am going to miss. I line up the white, hit it and in my impatience miss the black completely. I wait for the blow, but it doesn't come. Instead, he leans right over me, flattening me against the table, takes the cue out of my hand, and rolls it to the side cushion. I can feel him, hard, against my behind.

"You missed," he says softly in my ear. My cheek is pressed against the soft baize. "Put your hands flat on the table." I do as he says.

"Good. I'm going to spank you now, and next time, maybe you won't." He shifts so he's standing to my left side, his erection against my hip.

I groan and my heart leaps into my mouth. My breath comes in short pants and a hot, heavy excitement courses through my veins. Very gently, he caresses my behind and curls his other hand around the nape of my neck, his fingers fisting in my hair, his elbow at my back, holding me down. I am completely helpless.

"Open your legs," he murmurs, and for a moment I hesitate.

And he smacks me hard – with the ruler! The noise is harsher than the sting, and it takes me by surprise. I gasp, and he hits me again.

"Legs," he orders.

I open my legs, panting. The ruler strikes again. It stings, but its crack across my skin sounds worse than it actually feels. I close my eyes and absorb the pain. It's not too bad, and I can hear Edward's breathing get harsher. He hits me again and I moan. I am not sure how many more strokes I can bear, but hearing him, how turned on he is, feeds my arousal and my willingness to continue. I am crossing to the dark side, a place in my psyche I don't know well, but have visited before in the playroom – with the Tallis. I moan loudly, and Edward groans too in response. He hits me again – harder this time – and I wince.

"Stop." The word is out of my mouth before I'm even aware that I've said it.

Edward drops the ruler immediately and releases me.

"You okay?" he whispers.

"Yes."

"Continue?" he asks, his voice strained.

"Yes," I murmur, with longing.

He undoes his fly as I lie panting on the table, knowing that he's going to be rough. I marvel once more at how I have managed, and yes, enjoyed, what he's done to me up to that point. It's so dark, but so him. He eases two fingers inside me, and moves them in a circular motion. The feeling is exquisite. I close my eyes and revel in the sensation. I hear the telltale rip of foil, and then he's standing behind me, between my legs, pushing them wider. Very slowly he sinks into me, filling me. I hear his groan of pure pleasure, and it stirs my soul. He grasps my hips firmly, eases out of me again, and this time slams back into me, causing me to cry out. He stills for a moment.

"Again?" he asks softly.

"Yes, I'm fine. Lose yourself. Take me with you," I mutter breathlessly.

He moans low in his throat, eases out of me once more, then slams into me. He repeats this over and over, slowly, deliberately – a punishing, brutal, heavenly rhythm. Oh fucking my. I feel myself beginning to quicken. He feels it too, and he increases the rhythm, pushing me, higher, harder, faster. I surrender, exploding around him, a draining, soul grabbing orgasm, that leaves me spent and exhausted. I'm vaguely aware that Edward too is letting go, calling my name, his fingers digging into my hips and then he stills, and collapses on me.

We sink to the floor and he cradles me in his arms like a child.

"Thank you, love," he breathes, covering my upturned face in soft feather-light kisses. I open my eyes and gaze up him, and he wraps his arms tighter around me.

He smiles softly down at me.

"Your cheek is pink from the baize," he murmurs, rubbing my face softly. "How was that?" he asks, eyes wide and cautious.

"Teeth-clenchingly good," I mutter. "I like it rough, Edward, and I like it gentle, too. I like that it's with you." Jeez, I'm tired.

He closes his eyes and hugs me even tighter.

"You never fail, Bella. You are beautiful, bright, challenging, fun, sex on legs, and I thank divine providence everyday that it was you that came to interview me and not Rosalie Hale." He kisses my hair.

I smile and yawn against his chest.

"I'm wearing you out. Come. Bath, then bed."

We are both in Edward's bath, facing each other, chin-deep in foam, the sweet scent of jasmine enveloping us. Edward is massaging my feet, one at a time. It feels so good it should be illegal.

"Can I ask you something?" I breathe.

"Of course. Anything, Bella, you know that."

I take a deep breath and sit up, flinching only slightly.

"Tomorrow, when I go to work, can Stuart just deliver me to the front door of the office and then pick me up at the end of the day? Please, Edward. Please," I plead.

His hands still as his brow creases.

"I thought we agreed," he grumbles sternly.

"Please," I beg.

"What about lunchtime?"

"I'll make myself something to take from here so I don't have to go out. Please."

He kisses my instep.

"I find it very difficult to say no to you, especially when you plead this way. You won't go out?"

"No."

"Okay."

I beam at him.

"Thank you." I lean up on my knees, sloshing water everywhere, and kiss him.

"You're most welcome, Miss Swan. How's your behind?"

"Sore, but not too bad. The water is soothing."

"I'm glad you told me to stop," he says, gazing at me.

"So is my behind."

He grins.

I stretch out in bed… so tired. It's only 10:30, but it feels like three in the morning. This has to be one of the most exhausting weekends of my life.

"Didn't Ms. Acton provide any nightwear?" Edward says disapprovingly as he stares down at me.

"I have no idea. I like wearing your t-shirts," I mumble sleepily.

His face softens and he leans over and kisses my forehead.

"I need to work, but I don't want to leave you alone. Can I use your laptop to log in to the office? Will I disturb you if I work from here?"

"S'not my laptop…" I drift.

The radio alarm clicks on, startling me awake with the traffic news. Edward is still asleep beside me. Rubbing my eyes I glance at the clock. Six thirty – too early. It's raining outside, first time for ages, and the light is muted and mellow. I feel so cozy and comfortable in this vast modern monolith with Edward at my side. I stretch and turn to the delicious man beside me. His eyes spring open and he blinks sleepily.

"Good morning." I smile, and gently caress his face, leaning down to kiss him sweetly.

"Good morning, baby. I always wake before the alarm goes off," he murmurs in wonder.

"It's set so early."

"That it is, Miss Swan." Edward grins at me. "I have to get up."

He kisses me, then he's up and out of bed. I flop back against the pillows… *oh my.* Waking up on a school day next to Edward Cullen. How did this all happen? I close my eyes and doze.

"Come on sleepyhead, get up." Edward leans over me. He's shaved, clean, fresh… hmmm, he smells so good… in a crisp white shirt and black suit, no tie – the CEO is back. Holy crow, he looks good like this too.

"What?" he asks, gazing at me in alarm.

"I wish you'd come back to bed."

His lips part slightly, surprised by my come-on, and he smiles, almost shyly.

"You are insatiable, Miss Swan. As much as that idea appeals, I have an 8:30 meeting, so I have to go shortly."

Oh. I've slept for another hour or so. Shit. I leap out of bed, much to Edward's amusement.

I shower and dress quickly, choosing a fitted grey pencil skirt, pale grey silk shirt, and high-heeled black pumps – all care of my new wardrobe. I brush my hair and carefully put it up, then wander out to the great room, not really knowing what to expect. How am I going to get to work? Edward is sipping coffee at the breakfast bar. Mrs. Cope is in the kitchen making pancakes and bacon.

"You look lovely," Edward murmurs. Wrapping an arm around me he kisses me under my ear. Out of the corner of my eye I can see Mrs. Cope smile. I flush.

"Good morning, Miss Swan," she says as she places pancakes and bacon in front of me.

"Oh, thank you. Good morning," I mutter. Jeez – I could get used to this.

"Mr. Cullen says you'd like to take lunch with you to work. What would you like to eat?"

Oh… I glance at Edward, who is trying very hard not to smirk at me. I narrow my eyes at him.

"A sandwich… salad. I really don't mind." I beam at Mrs. Cope.

"I'll rustle up a packed lunch for you, ma'am."

"Please, Mrs. Cope, call me Bella."

"Bella," she smiles and turns to make me tea. Wow… this is so cool.

I turn and cock my head at Edward, challenging him. Go on, accuse me of flirting with Mrs. Cope.

"I have to go, baby. Taylor will come back and drop you at work with Stuart."

"Only to the door."

"Yes. Only to the door." Edward rolls his eyes. "Be careful though."

I glance around and Taylor is standing in the entranceway. Edward stands and kisses me, grasping my chin.

"Laters, baby."

"Have a good day at the office, dear," I call after him. He turns and flashes me his dazzling smile, then he's gone.

Mrs. Cope hands me a cup of tea and I suddenly feel awkward… just the two of us here, without Edward.

"How long have you worked for Edward?" I ask, thinking I ought to make some kind of conversation.

"Four years or so," she says pleasantly, as she sets about making my packed lunch.

"You know, I can do that," I mutter, embarrassed that she should be doing this for me.

"You eat your breakfast, Bella. This is what I do. I enjoy it. It's nice to look after someone other than Mr. Taylor and Mr. Cullen." She smiles very sweetly at me.

Oh. My cheeks go pink with pleasure, and there's so much I want to ask this woman. She must know so much about Fifty, but although her manner is warm and friendly, it's also very professional. I know I'll only embarrass both of us if I start quizzing her, so I finish my breakfast in a reasonably comfortable silence, punctuated only by her questions on my food preferences for lunch.

Twenty-five minutes later, Stuart appears at the entrance. I have brushed my teeth and I'm waiting to go. Clutching my brown paper lunch bag – I can't even remember my mom doing this for me – Stuart and I head to the first floor via the elevator. He's very taciturn too, giving nothing away. Taylor is waiting in the Mercedes and I climb into the rear passenger seat when Stuart opens the door.

"Good morning, Taylor," I say brightly.

"Miss Swan." He smiles.

"Taylor, I'm sorry about yesterday. My inappropriate remarks. I hope I didn't get you into trouble."

Taylor frowns in bemusement at me via the rear view mirror as he pulls out into the Seattle traffic.

"Miss Swan, I very rarely get into trouble," he says reassuringly.

Oh good, maybe Edward didn't tell him off. Just me then, I think sourly.

"I'm glad to hear it, Taylor." I smile.

James gazes at me, seemingly assessing my appearance, as I make my way to my desk.

"Morning Bella. Good weekend?"

"Yes, thanks. You?"

"It was good. Get settled in, I have stuff for you to do."

I nod and sit down at my computer. It seems like years since I was at work. I switch on my computer and fire up my email program. Of course, there's an email from Edward.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Boss
Date: 15 June 2009 08.24
To: Isabella Swan

Good morning, Miss Swan.
I just wanted to say thank you for a wonderful weekend in spite of all the drama!
I hope you never leave, ever.
And just to remind you that the news of SIP is embargoed for four weeks.
Delete this email as soon as you've read it.

Yours

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings & Your boss's, boss's, boss's boss.

-

Hope I never leave? Does he want me to move in? Holy Moses... I barely know the man. I press delete.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Bossy
Date: 15 June 2009: 09.03
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen

Are you asking me to move in with you?
And of course I remembered that the evidence of your epic stalking capabilities is embargoed for another 4 weeks.
Do I make a check out to Coping Together and send to your dad?
Please don't delete this email… please respond to it.

ILYxxx

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

"Bella!" James makes me jump.

"Yes…" I flush, and James frowns at me.

"Everything okay?"

"Sure." I scramble up and quickly take my notebook into his office.

"Good. As you probably remember, I'm going to that Commissioning Fiction symposium in New York on Thursday. I have tickets and reservations, but I'd like you to come with me."

"Oh… To New York?"

"Yes. We'll need to go Wednesday and stay overnight. I think you'll find it a very educational experience." His eyes darken slightly as he says this, but his smile is polite."Would you make the necessary travel arrangements? And book an additional room at the hotel where I am staying? I think Sabrina – my previous PA – left all the details handy somewhere."

"Okay." I smile wanly at James.

Holy crap. I wander back to my desk. This is not going to go down well with Fifty, but the fact is, I want to go. It sounds like a real opportunity, and I'm sure I can keep James off me, if that's his ulterior motive. Back at my desk, there's a response from Edward.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Me, Bossy!
Date: 15 June 2009 09.07
To: Isabella Swan

Yes. Please.

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

Jeez... he *does* want me to move in. Oh, Edward – it's too soon. I put my head in my hands to try and recover my wits. This is all I need after my extraordinary weekend. I haven't had a moment to myself to think through and understand all that I have experienced and discovered these last two days.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Bannerisms
Date: 15 June 2009: 09.20
To: Edward Cullen

Edward,

What happened to walking before we run?
Can we talk about this tonight, please?
I have been asked to go to a conference in New York on Thursday. It means an overnight stay on Wednesday.

Just thought you should know.

Bx

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: WHAT?

Date: 15 June 2009 09.21
To: Isabella Swan

Yes. Let's talk this evening.
Are you going on your own?

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: No **Bold** Shouty Capitals on a Monday Morning!
Date: 15 June 2009: 09.30
To: Edward Cullen

Can we talk about this tonight?

Bx

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: You Haven't Seen Shouty Yet.
Date: 15 June 2009 09.35
To: Isabella Swan

Tell me.
If it's with the sleazeball you work with, then the answer is, over my dead body.

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

My heart sinks. Jeez, it's like he's my Dad.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: No **YOU** haven't seen shouty yet.

Date: 15 June 2009: 09.46
To: Edward Cullen

Yes, it is with James.
I want to go. It's an exciting opportunity for me.
And I have never been to New York.
Don't get your knickers in a twist.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: No **YOU** haven't seen shouty yet.
Date: 15 June 2009 09.50
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella

It's not my fucking knickers I am worried about.
The answer is NO.

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

"No!" I shout at my computer, causing the entire office to come to a standstill and stare at me. James peers out from his office.

"Everything alright, Bella?"

"Yes. Sorry," I mutter. "I err – just didn't save a document." I am scarlet with embarrassment. He smiles at me, but with a puzzled expression.

I take several deep breaths and quickly type a response. I am so mad.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Fifty Shades
Date: 15 June 2009: 09.59
To: Edward Cullen

Edward

You need to get a grip.
I am NOT going to sleep with James – not for all the tea in China.
I LOVE you. That's what happens when people love each other.
They TRUST each other.
I don't think you are going to SLEEP WITH, SPANK, FUCK or WHIP anyone else. I have FAITH and TRUST in you.
Please extend the same COURTESY to me.

Bella

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

I sit waiting for his response. Nothing arrives. I call the airline and book a ticket for myself, ensuring I am on the same flight as James. I hear the ping of new mail.

-

From: Lincoln, Irina
Subject: Lunch Date
Date: 15 June 2009 10.15
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Isabella
I would really like to have lunch with you. I think we got off on the wrong foot and I'd like to make that right. Are you free sometime this week?

Irina Lincoln

-

Holy crap – not Mrs. Robinson! How the hell did she find out my email address? I put my head in my hands. Can this day get any worse?

Chapter 72

My phone rings and wearily I lift my head from my hands and answer, glancing at the clock. It is only 10:20 and already I wish I hadn't left Edward's bed.

"James Smith's Office, Bella Swan speaking."

An achingly familiar voice snarls at me.

"Will you please delete the last email you sent me and try to be a little more circumspect in the language you use in your work email? I told you, the system is monitored. I shall endeavor to do some damage limitation from here." He hangs up.

Holy shit… I sit staring at the phone. Edward hung up on me. The man is stomping all over my fledgling career with his size nines, and he hung on me. I glare at the receiver and if it wasn't completely inanimate, I know it would shrivel in horror under my withering stare.

I open my emails and delete the one I sent him. It's not that bad. I just mention spanking and… well, whipping. Jeez, if he's so ashamed of it he shouldn't damn well do it. I pick up my BlackBerry and call his mobile.

"What?" he snaps.

"I am going to New York whether you like it or not," I hiss.

"Don't count – "

I snap the phone closed – cutting him off mid sentence. Adrenaline is coursing around my body. There – that told him. I am so mad. I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself. Closing my eyes I imagine that I am in my happy place… hmm, a boat cabin, with Edward. I shake the image off, as I am too mad at Fifty right now for him to be any where near my happy place. Opening my eyes, I calmly reach for my notebook and carefully run through my to do list. I take a long deep breath, my equilibrium restored.

"Bella!" James shouts, startling me. "Don't book that flight!"

"Oh… too late. I've done it," I reply as he strides out of his office over to me.

He looks mad. Oh no.

"Look, there's something going on. For some reason, all travel and hotel expenses for all staff have suddenly got to be approved by senior management. This has come right from the top. I am going up to see old Roach. Apparently there's a moratorium on all spending

that's just been implemented. I don't understand it." James pinches the bridge of his nose and closes his eyes.

Most of the blood drains from my face, and knots form in my stomach. *Fifty!*

"Take my calls. I'll go see what Roach has to say." He winks at me, and strides towards the double doors, off to see his boss – not the boss's boss's boss.

Damn it. Edward Cullen… my blood starts to boil again.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: What have you done?
Date: 15 June 2009: 10.43
To: Edward Cullen

Please tell me you won't interfere with my work.
I really want to go to this conference.
I shouldn't have to ask you.
I have deleted the offending email.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: What have you done?
Date: 15 June 2009 10.46
To: Isabella Swan

I am just protecting what is mine.
The email that you so rashly sent is wiped from the SIP server now, as are my emails to you.
Incidentally, I trust you implicitly, it's him I don't trust.

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I check to see if I still have his emails, and they have disappeared. This man's influence knows no bounds. How does he do this? Who does he know that can stealthily delve into the depths of SIP's servers and remove emails? I am so out of my league here.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Grown Up
Date: 15 June 2009: 10.48
To: Edward Cullen

Edward, I don't need protecting from my own boss.
He may make a pass at me, but I shall say no.
You cannot interfere. It's wrong and controlling on so many levels.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: The Answer is NO
Date: 15 June 2009 10.50
To: Isabella Swan

Bella, I have seen how "effective" you are at fighting off unwanted attention. I remember that's how I had the pleasure of spending my first night with you. At least the photographer has feelings for you. The sleazeball, on the other hand, does not. He is a serial philanderer and he will try to seduce you. Ask him what happened to his previous PA, and the one before that.

I don't want to fight about this.

If you want to go to New York, I'll take you. We can go this weekend. I have an apartment there.

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

Oh, Edward! That's not the point. Oh, he's so frustrating. And of course he has an apartment there. Where else does he own property? Trust him to bring up Jake. Will I ever live that down? I was drunk for heavens sake. I wouldn't get drunk with James. I shake my

head at the screen, but figure I cannot continue to argue with him over email. I shall have to bide my time until this evening. I check the clock. James is still not back from his meeting with Charles and I need to deal with Irina. I read her email again and decide that the best way to handle it is to send it to Edward. Let him concentrate on her rather than me.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: FW Lunch date - or Irritating Baggage
Date: 15 June 2009: 11.15
To: Edward Cullen

Edward – While you have been busy interfering in my career and saving your ass from my careless missives, I received the following email from Mrs. Lincoln. I really don't want to meet with her – even if I did, I am not allowed to leave this building. I don't want to hear about you from her. How she got ahold of my email address, I don't know. What would you suggest I do? Her email is below:

Dear Isabella
I would really like to have lunch with you. I think we got off on the wrong foot and I'd like to make that right. Are you free sometime this week?
Irina Lincoln

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Irritating Baggage
Date: 15 June 2009 11.23
To: Isabella Swan

Don't be mad at me. I have your best interests at heart.
If anything happened to you, I would never forgive myself.
I'll deal with Mrs. Lincoln.

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Laters

Date: 15 June 2009: 11.32
To: Edward Cullen

Can we please discuss this tonight?
I am trying to work and you're very distracting.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

James returns after midday and tells me that New York is off, and that there's nothing he can do to change senior management policy. He strides into his office, slamming the door none too gently, obviously furious. Why is he so angry? Deep down, I know his intentions are less than honorable, but I am sure I can deal with him, and I wonder what Edward knows about James's previous PAs. I park these thoughts and continue with some work, but resolve to try and make Edward change his mind, though the prospects are bleak.

At one o'clock, James pokes his head out of the office door.

"Bella, please could you go and get me some lunch?"

"Sure. What would you like?"

"Pastrami on rye, hold the mustard. I'll give you the money when you're back."

"Anything to drink?"

"Coke, please. Thanks, Bella."

He goes back into his office as I reach for my purse. Oh shit… I promised Edward I wouldn't go out. I sigh. He'll never know, and I'll be quick.

Claire from reception offers me her umbrella since it is still pouring with rain. As I head out of the front doors, I pull my jacket around me and take a furtive glance in both directions from beneath the overlarge golfing umbrella. Nothing seems amiss. There's no sign of ghost girl. I march briskly, and I hope inconspicuously, down the block to the deli. However, the closer I get to the deli, I don't know if it's my heightened feeling of paranoia, but I have a creeping sense that I am being watched. Shit. I hope it's not Lauren with a gun. It's just your imagination, my subconscious snaps. Who the hell would want to shoot you?

Within fifteen minutes I am back – safe, sound but beyond relieved. Jeez, Edward's over-cautious reaction to everything is beginning to get to me.

As I take James's lunch into him, he glances up from the phone.

"Bella, thanks. Since you're not coming with me, I'm going to need you to work late. We need to get these briefs ready. Hope you don't have plans." He smiles up at me warmly, and I can feel myself flush.

"No, that's fine," I mutter, with a bright smile and a sinking heart. Oh, this is not going to go down well. Edward will freak, I'm sure. As I head back to my desk I decide not to tell him immediately, otherwise he might have time to interfere in someway. I sit and eat the chicken salad sandwich Mrs. Cope made for me. It's delicious – she makes a mean sandwich. Of course, if I moved in with Edward, she would make lunch for me every weekday. The idea is unsettling. I have never had dreams of wealth and power, only love. To find someone who loves me, and doesn't try to control my every move. The phone rings.

"James Smith's office…"

"You assured me you wouldn't go out," Edward interrupts me, his voice cold and hard.

My heart sinks for the millionth time this day. *Oh shit. H*ow the hell does he know?

"James sent me out for some lunch. I couldn't say no. Are you having me watched?" My mouth goes dry at the thought. No wonder I felt so paranoid – someone *was* watching me. The thought makes me angry.

"This is why I didn't want you going back to work," Edward snaps at me.

"Edward, please. You're being…" *So Fifty.* "...so suffocating."

"Suffocating?" he whispers, surprised.

"Yes. You have to stop this. I'll talk to you this evening. Unfortunately, I have to work late, because I can't go to New York."

"Isabella, I don't want to suffocate you," he says quietly and I can hear in his voice that he's appalled at the thought.

"Well you are. I have work to do. I'll talk to you later." I hang up, feeling drained and vaguely depressed. After our wonderful weekend, the reality is hitting home. I have never felt more like running. Running to some quiet retreat so I can think about this man, about how he is, and about how to deal with him. On one level, he's so broken – I can see that clearly now – and it's both heartbreaking and exhausting. From the small pieces of precious information that he's given me about his life, I understand why: an unloved child, a hideously abusive environment, a mother who couldn't protect him, and whom he couldn't

protect, who died in front of him. I shudder. My poor Fifty. I am his, but not to keep in some gilded cage. How am I going to make him see this?

With a heavy heart, I drag one of the manuscripts James wants me to summarize into my lap and continue to read. I can think of no easy solution to Edward's fucked-up control issues. I will just have to talk to him later, face-to-face.

Half an hour later, James emails me a document that I need to tidy up and polish, ready for printing tomorrow, in time for his conference. It will take me not just the rest of the afternoon but well into the evening too. I set to work.

When I look up it's after seven, and the office is deserted, though the light in James's office is still on. I hadn't noticed everyone leaving, but I am nearly finished. I email the document back to James for his approval and check my inbox. There's nothing new from Edward, so I quickly glance at my BlackBerry, and it startles me by buzzing – it's Edward.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi… when will you be finished?"

"By 7:30, I think."

"I'll meet you outside."

"Okay."

He sounds so… quiet. Nervous, even. Why? Wary of my reaction?

"I'm still mad at you, but that's all," I whisper. "We have a lot to talk about."

"I know. See you at 7:30."

James comes out of his office.

"I have to go. See you later." I hang up.

I look up at James as he strolls casually towards me.

"I just need a couple of tweaks. I've emailed the brief back to you."

He leans over me while I retrieve the document, rather close… uncomfortably close. His arm brushes mine – accidentally? I flinch, but he pretends not to notice. His other arm rests on the back of my chair, touching my back. I sit up so I'm not leaning against the backrest.

"Pages 16 and 23, and that should be it," he murmurs, his mouth inches from my ear.

I can feel my skin flush at his proximity, but I choose to ignore it, opening the document and shakily make a start on the changes. He's still leaning over me, and all my senses are hyper-aware. It's distracting and it's awkward and inside I am screaming, BACK OFF!

"Once this is done it'll be good to go to print. You can organize that tomorrow. Thank you for staying late and doing this, Bella." His voice is smooth, gentle, like he's talking to a wounded animal. My stomach twists. "I think the least I could do is reward you with a quick drink. You deserve one."

He tucks a strand of my hair, that's come loose from my hair tie, behind my ear, and gently caresses the lobe. I cringe and grit my teeth inwardly, and I jerk my head away. Shit! Edward was right. *Don't touch me.*

"Actually, I can't this evening." Or any other evening, James…

"Just a quick one?" he coaxes.

"No, I can't. But thank you."

James sits on the end of my desk and frowns down at me, and alarm bells sound loudly in my head. I am on my own, in the office. I cannot leave. I glance nervously at the clock. Another five minutes before Edward is due.

"Bella, I think we make a great team. I'm sorry that I couldn't pull off this New York trip. It won't be the same without you."

I'm sure it won't. I smile weakly up at him, because I can't think of what to say. And for the first time all day, I feel the tiniest hint of relief that I am not going.

"So, did you have a good weekend?" he asks smoothly.

"Yes, thanks." Where is he going with this?

"See your boyfriend?"

"Yes."

"What does he do?"

Owns your ass…

"He's in business."

"That's interesting. What kind of business?"

"Oh, he has his fingers in all sorts of pies."

James cocks his head to one side as he leans in towards me, invading my personal space – again.

"You're being very coy, Bella."

"Well, he's in telecommunications, manufacturing, and agriculture."

James raises his eyebrows.

"So many things. Who does he work for?"

"He works for himself. If you're happy with the document, I'd like to go… if that's okay?"

He leans back. My personal space is safe again.

"Of course. Sorry, I didn't mean to keep you," he says disingenuously.

"What time does the building close?"

"Security are here until eleven."

"Good." I smile slightly at him, and my subconscious flops down in her armchair, relieved to know that we are not alone in the building. Switching off my computer, I grab my purse and stand up, ready to leave.

"You like him then? Your boyfriend?"

"I love him," I answer, looking James squarely in the eye.

"I see." James frowns and he stands up from my desk. "What's his surname?"

I flush.

"Cullen. Edward Cullen," I mumble.

James mouth drops open slightly.

"Seattle's richest bachelor? That Edward Cullen?"

"Yes. The same." Yes, that Edward Cullen, your future boss, who will have you for breakfast if you invade my personal space again.

"Oh. I thought he looked familiar," James says darkly. "Well, he's a very lucky man."

I blink at him. What do I say to that?

"Have a good evening, Bella." James smiles, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes, and he walks stiffly back into his office without a backward glance. I let out a long sigh of relief. Well, that might be that problem solved. Fifty works his magic again. Just his name is my talisman, and it has this man retreating with his tail between his legs. I can't help my small victorious smile. You see, Edward? Even your name protects me – you didn't have to go to all that trouble of clamping down on expenses. I tidy my desk and check my watch. Edward should be outside.

The Mercedes is parked up against the sidewalk and Taylor leaps out to open the rear passenger door. I have never been so pleased to see him, and I scramble into the car out of the rain. Edward is in the rear seat, gazing at me, his eyes wide and wary. He's expecting my anger. I can feel the tension radiating off him.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi," he replies cautiously.

He reaches over and grasps my hand, squeezing it tightly, and my heart thaws a little. I am so confused. I haven't even worked out what I need to say to him.

"Have you forgiven me?" he asks.

"I don't know," I murmur.

He raises my hand and lightly grazes my knuckles with soft, butterfly kisses.

"It's been a shit day," he says.

"Yes, it has." But for the first time since he left for work this morning, I begin to relax. Just being in his company is a soothing balm, and all the shit from James, and the snarky emails to and fro, and the pesky persistence of Irina, fade into the background. It's just me and my control freak in the back of the car.

"It's better now that you're here," he murmurs. We sit in silence as Taylor weaves through the evening traffic, both of us broody and contemplative, but I feel Edward slowly unwind beside me as he too relaxes, gently running his thumb across my knuckles… a soft, soothing rhythm.

Taylor drops us outside the apartment building and we both quickly duck inside out of the rain. Edward clasps my hand as we wait for the elevator, his eyes scanning the front of the building.

"I take it you haven't found Lauren yet."

"No. But Jenks is still looking for her," he mutters despondently.

The elevator arrives and in we step. Edward glances down at me, his green eyes unreadable. Oh he just looks glorious – tousled hair, white shirt, dark suit. And suddenly it's there, from nowhere, that feeling. Oh my – longing, lust, electricity. If it were visible it would be an intense blue aura around and between us, it's so strong. His lips part as he gazes at me.

"Do you feel it?" he breathes.

"Yes."

"Oh, Bella," he groans and he grabs me, his arms snaking round me, one hand at the nape of my neck, tipping my head back as his lips find mine. My fingers are in his hair, caressing his cheek as he pushes me back against the elevator wall.

"I hate arguing with you," he breathes against my mouth, and there's a desperate, passionate quality to his kiss that mirrors mine. Desire explodes in my body, all the tension of the day seeking an outlet, straining against him, seeking more. We're all tongues and breathing and hands and touch and sweet, sweet sensation. His hand is on my hip and abruptly he's pulling up my skirt, his fingers stroking my thighs.

"Sweet Jesus, you're wearing stockings," he moans in appreciative awe, and I feel his thumb caress the flesh above my stocking line. "I want to see this," he breathes as he pulls my skirt right up, exposing the tops of my thighs. Stepping back, he reaches over to press the stop button, and the elevator coasts smoothly to a halt between the 42nd and 43rd floors. His eyes are dark, lips parted, he's breathing hard, as am I. We gaze at each other, not touching. I am grateful for the wall against my back, holding me up while I bask in this beautiful man's sensual, carnal appraisal.

"Take your hair down," he orders softly.

I reach up and unsnag the hair tie, releasing my hair so it tumbles in a thick cloud around my shoulders to my breasts.

"Undo the top two buttons of your shirt," he whispers, his eyes wilder now.

He makes me feel so wanton. My inner goddess is writhing on her chaise longue, waiting, wanting. I reach up and undo each button, achingly slowly, so that the tops of my breasts are tantalizingly revealed.

He swallows.

"Do you have any idea how alluring you look right now?"

Very deliberately, I bite my lip and shake my head.

He closes his eyes very briefly and when he opens them again, they are blazing at me. He steps forward so he's as close as he can be without touching me. I tip my face up to gaze at him and he leans down and runs his nose against mine, so it's the only contact between us. Oh my. I am so hot in the confines of this elevator with him. I want him… now.

"I think you do, Miss Swan. I think you like to drive me wild."

"Do I drive you wild?" I whisper.

"In all things, Isabella. You are a siren, a goddess."

And he reaches for me, grasping my leg above my knee and hitching it around his waist, so that I am standing on one leg, leaning into him. I can feel him against me, feel him hard and wanting at the apex of my thighs, as he runs his lips down my throat. I moan loudly as I wrap my arms around his neck.

"I'm going to take you now, Isabella," he breathes and I arch my back in response, pressing myself against him, eager for the friction.

He groans deep and low in the back of his throat, and boosts me higher as he undoes his flies.

"Hold tight baby," he murmurs, and magically produces a foil packet that he holds in front of my mouth. I take it between my teeth, and he tugs, so that between us, we rip it open.

"Good girl," he murmurs.

He steps back a fraction as he slides on the condom.

"God, I can't wait for the next 6 days," he growls and he gazes down at me through hooded eyes. "I do hope you're not over fond of these panties." I can feel them pull and tear beneath his adept fingers, and they are no more. My blood is pounding through my veins. I am panting with need. His words are intoxicating, all my angst from the day momentarily forgotten, it's just me and him, doing what he does best. Without taking his eyes off mine,

he sinks slowly into me. Oh my. My body bows and I tilt my head back, closing my eyes, relishing the feel of him inside me. He pulls back, and then moves into me again, so slow… so sweet. I groan.

"You're mine, Isabella," he murmurs against my throat.

"Yes," I breathe… "Yours. When will you accept that?" I pant.

He groans loudly and starts to move, really move – oh – my. And I surrender myself to his relentless rhythm, savoring each push and pull, his ragged breathing, his need for me, reflecting mine. It makes me feel powerful, strong, desired and loved – loved by this captivating, damaged man, whom I love in return, with all my heart.

He kisses me gently, spent and calm, his breathing easing. Holding me upright against the elevator wall, our foreheads pressed together, my body like jelly, weak but gratifyingly sated from my climax.

"Oh, Bella," he murmurs. "I need you so much." He presses a kiss against my forehead.

"And I you, Edward."

Releasing me, he straightens my skirt and does up the two buttons on my shirt, then punches the combination into the keypad that starts the lift again. It rises with a jolt so that I reach out and clasp his arms.

"Taylor will be wondering where we are," he grins lasciviously at me.

Oh shit. I drag my fingers through my hair in a vain attempt to combat the just-fucked look, then give up and tie it in a ponytail.

"You'll do." Edward smirks as he does up his flies, looking once more like the embodiment of an American entrepreneur, and since his hair looks just-fucked most of the time, there's very little difference. Except now he's smiling, relaxed, his eyes crinkling with boyish charm. Are all men this easily placated?

Taylor is indeed waiting when the doors open.

"Problem with the elevator," Edward murmurs as we both step out, and I cannot look either of them in the face. I just scurry through the double doors and to Edward's bedroom in search of some fresh underwear.

When I return Edward has removed his jacket and is sitting at the breakfast bar chatting with Mrs. Cope. She smiles kindly at me as she puts out two plates of hot food for us. Hmmm, it smells delicious – coq au vin, if I am not mistaken.

"Enjoy Mr. Cullen, Bella," she says, and leaves us to it.

Edward fetches a bottle of white wine from the fridge and as we sit and eat he tells me about how much nearer he's getting to perfecting the wind-up mobile phone. He's animated and excited about the whole project, and I know then that he hasn't had an entirely shit day. I ask him about his property. He smirks and it turns out he only has the apartment in New York and Aspen… and Escala. Nothing else. When we're done, I collect his plate and mine and take them to sink.

"Leave that. Gail will do it," he says.

Will I get used to this? I turn and gaze at him and he's watching me intently.

"Well, now that you are more docile, shall we talk about today?" Edward asks.

"I think you're the one who's more docile. I think I'm doing a good job in taming you."

"Taming me?" he snorts, amused.

When I nod, he frowns, reflecting.

"Yes. Maybe you are, Isabella."

"You were right about James," I murmur, serious now, and I lean across the kitchen island to gauge his reaction.

Edward's face falls and his eyes harden.

"Has he tried anything?" he whispers, his voice deathly cold.

I shake my head to reassure him.

"No, and he won't, Edward. I told him today that I'm your girlfriend and he backed right off."

Edward scowls at me.

"You're sure? I could fire the fucker."

I sigh, emboldened by my glass of wine.

"You really have to let me fight my own battles. You can't constantly second-guess me and try to protect me. It's stifling, Edward. I'll never flourish with your incessant interference. I need some freedom. I wouldn't dream of meddling in your affairs."

He blinks at me.

"I only want you safe, Isabella. If anything happened to you, I – " He stops.

"I know, and I understand why you feel so driven to protect me. And part of me loves it. I know that if I need you, you'll be there, like I am for you. But if we are to have any hope of a future together you have to trust me, and trust my judgment. Yes, I'll get it wrong sometimes, but I have to learn."

He stares at me, and his expression is anxious, spurring me to walk round to him so that I am standing between his legs while he sits on the bar stool. Grabbing his hands I put them around me, and place my hands on his arms.

"You can't interfere in my job, Edward. It's wrong. I need to make my own mistakes. I don't need you charging in like a white knight to save the day. I know you want to control everything, and I understand why, but you can't. It's an impossible goal – you have to learn to let go." I reach up and stroke his face as he gazes at me, his green eyes wide.

"And if you can do that – give me that – I'll move in with you," I add softly.

He inhales sharply, surprised.

"You'd do that?" he whispers, in wonder.

"Yes."

He frowns.

"But you don't know me." He sounds choked and panicky suddenly. Very UnFifty.

"I know you well enough, Edward. Nothing you tell me about yourself will frighten me away." I gently run my knuckles across his cheek.

His expression turns from anxious to dubious.

"But if you could just ease up on me," I plead.

"I'm trying, Isabella. I couldn't just stand by and let you go to New York with that… sleazeball. He has a bad rep. None of his interns has lasted more than two months, and they're never retained by the company. I don't want that for you, baby," he sighs. "I don't

want anything to happen to you. You being hurt, the thought fills me with dread. I can't promise not to interfere, not if I think you'll come to harm." He pauses and takes a deep breath.

"I love you, Isabella. I will do everything in my power to protect you. I cannot imagine my life without you."

Holy crow. My inner goddess, my subconscious, and I all gape at Fifty in shock. Jeez, three little words. My world stands still, tilts, then spins on a new axis – and I savor the moment, gazing into his sincere, burning, beautiful, green eyes.

"I love you too, Edward." I lean over and kiss him, and the kiss deepens.

Taylor, entering unseen, clears his throat. Edward pulls back, gazing intently at me. He stands, his arm around my waist.

"Yes?" he snaps at Taylor.

"Mrs. Lincoln is on her way up, Sir."

"What?"

Taylor shrugs apologetically.

Edward sighs heavily and shakes his head.

"Well, this should be interesting," he mutters and gives me a crooked grin of resignation.

Fuck! Why can't that damned woman leave us alone?

Chapter 73

"Did you talk to her today?" I ask Edward as we wait for *her* arrival.

"Yes."

"What did you say?"

"I said that you didn't want to see her, and that I understood and respected that. I also told her that I didn't appreciate it, her going behind my back."

Oh… good.

"What did she say to that?"

He gazes down at me.

"She sort of brushed it off, in a way that only Irina can." His mouth flattens to a crooked line.

Oh…

"So why do you think she's here?"

"I have no idea." Edward shrugs.

Taylor enters the great room again.

"Mrs. Lincoln," he announces.

And there she is… Why is so she so damned attractive? She's dressed entirely in black: tight jeans, a shirt that emphasizes her perfect figure, and a halo of bright glossy hair. Edward pulls me close.

"Irina," he says, and his tone is puzzled.

She gapes at me in shock, frozen to the spot. She blinks and then finds her soft voice.

"I'm sorry, I didn't realize you would have company, Edward. It's Monday."

As if this explains why she's here.

Edward tilts his head to one side and smirks at her.

"Girlfriend," he says by way of explanation.

And she smiles, a slow, dazzling, loving smile at him. It's unnerving.

"Of course. Hello, Isabella. I really didn't know you'd be here. I know you don't want to talk to me. And I accept that."

"Do you?" I assert quietly, gazing at her, taking both of them by surprise.

She moves further into the room, with a slight frown.

"Yes, I've got the message. I'm not here to see you. Like I said… Edward rarely has company during the week…" she stops. "I have a problem and I need to talk to Edward about it."

"Oh?" Edward straightens up. "Do you want a drink?"

"Yes please," she murmurs gratefully. Edward fetches a glass while Irina and I stand awkwardly gazing at each other. She gives me a small tight smile and goes to sit on one of the bar stools. She obviously knows the place well, and feels comfortable moving around in it. Do I stay? Do I go? Oh, this is so difficult. My subconscious scowls at the woman with her most hostile harpy face. There's so much I want to say to her, and none of it nice. But she's Edward's *friend*… his only friend. And for all my loathing of this woman, I am innately polite.

Edward pours wine into each of our glasses and sits between us at the breakfast bar. Can't he feel how weird this is?

"What's up?" he asks her.

Irina looks nervously at me, and Edward reaches over and clasps my hand.

"Isabella's my life now," he says softly to her silent query, and gently squeezes my hand.

What? Oh my… I flush, and my subconscious beams at him, harpy face forgotten.

Irina smiles at him – a soft, indulgent smile – like she's pleased for him. Really pleased for him. Oh, I don't understand this woman and I feel beyond uncomfortable. I have to keep remembering that he thinks she's his friend. She shifts and perches on the edge of her bar stool looking agitated, glancing nervously down at her hands. She starts manically twisting a large silver or platinum ring on her middle finger… around and around. Jeez, what's wrong with her? Is it my presence? Do I have that effect on her? Because I feel the same way – I don't want to be anywhere near her. She takes a deep breath and looks Edward square in the eye.

"I'm being blackmailed."

Holy shit. Not what I expected out of her mouth. Has someone found out about her penchant for beating and fucking underage boys? I have to suppress the wave of revulsion I feel. A fleeting thought about chickens coming home to roost crosses my mind, and my subconscious rubs her hands together with ill-disguised glee… *Good*.

"How?" Edward asks, concern and horror evident in his voice.

She reaches into her oversized patent-leather designer purse, pulls out a note and hands it to him.

"Put it down, lay it out." Edward points to the breakfast bar counter with his chin.

"You don't want to touch it?'

"No. Fingerprints."

"Edward, you know I can't go to the police with this."

Why am I listening to this? Is she fucking some other poor boy? I feel nauseous at the thought.

She lays the note out for him and he bends to read it.

"They're only asking for five thousand dollars," he says, almost absentmindedly. "Any idea who it's from? Someone in the community?"

"No," she says in her soft sweet voice.

"Linc?"

Linc? Who's that?

"What – after all this time? I don't think so," she grumbles.

"Does Seth know?"

"I haven't told him."

Who's Seth?

"I think he needs to know," Edward says softly.

She shakes her head, and now I feel I'm intruding. I want none of this. I try to retrieve my hand from Edward's grasp, but he just tightens his hold and turns to gaze at me.

"What?" he asks.

"I'm tired. I think I'll go to bed."

His eyes search mine, looking for… what? Censure? Acceptance? Hostility? I keep my expression as bland as possible.

"Okay," he says softly. "I won't be long."

He releases me and I stand. Irina watches me warily. There's so much I want to say to this woman, but she's Edward's only friend, I remind myself again, like it's a mantra.

"I don't think there's a great deal I can do, Irina," Edward says to her. "If it's a question of money…" his voice trails off. "I could ask Jenks to investigate."

"No, Edward, I just wanted to share," she says. "Goodnight, Isabella." She gives me a small smile.

"Goodnight," I mutter, and even to myself my voice sounds cold.

I quickly leave. The tension is too much for me to bear. When I am out of the room, I hear her soft sweet voice.

"You look very happy."

"I am," Edward responds.

"You deserve to be."

"I wish that were true."

"Edward," she scolds.

I freeze listening… I can't help it.

"Does she know how negative you are about yourself? About all your issues."

"She knows me better than anyone."

"Ouch! That hurts."

"It's the truth, Irina. I don't have to play games with her. And I mean it, leave her alone."

"What is her problem?"

"You… What we did. How we were. She doesn't understand."

"Make her understand."

"It's in the past, Irina, and why would I want to taint her with our fucked-up relationship? She's good and sweet and innocent and by some miracle she loves me."

"It's no miracle, Edward," Irina scoffs good-naturedly. "Have a little faith in yourself. You really are quite a catch. I've told you often enough. And she seems lovely, too. Strong. Someone to stand up to you."

I can't hear Edward's response. So I'm strong am I? I certainly don't feel that way.

"Don't you miss it?" Irina continues.

"What?"

"Your playroom."

I stop breathing.

"That really is none of your fucking business," Edward snaps.

Oh…

"I'm *sorry*." Irina snorts, sounding taunting and insincere.

"I think you'd better go. And please, call before you turn up again."

"Edward, I really am sorry. Since when were you so sensitive?" She's scolding him again.

"Irina, we have a business relationship which has profited us both immensely. Let's keep it that way. All the other stuff, it's part of the past. Isabella is my future and I won't jeopardize it in any way, so cut the fucking crap."

"I see."

"Look, I'm sorry for all this trouble. Perhaps you should ride it out and call their bluff." His tone is softer.

"I don't want to lose you, Edward."

"I'm not yours to lose, Irina," he snaps again.

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?" He's brusque, angry.

"Look, I don't want to argue with you. Your friendship means a lot to me. I'll back off from Isabella. But I'm here if you need me. I always will be."

"Isabella thinks that you saw me last Saturday. You called, that's all. Why did you tell her otherwise?"

"I wanted her to know how fucked up you were when she left. I don't want her to hurt you."

"She knows. I've told her. Stop interfering. Honestly, you're like a mother hen." Edward sounds more resigned, and Irina laughs, but there's a sad tone to her laugh.

"I know. I'm sorry. You know I care about you. I never thought you'd end up falling in love, Edward. It's very gratifying to see. But I couldn't bear it if she hurt you."

"I'll take my chances," he says dryly. "Now are you sure you don't want Jenks to sniff around?"

She sighs heavily.

"I suppose it wouldn't do any harm."

"Okay. I'll call him in the morning."

I stand listening to them bickering, trying to figure this out. They do sound like friends, as Edward says. Just friends. And she cares about him… maybe too much. Well, who wouldn't, if they knew him?

"Thank you, Edward. And I am sorry. I didn't mean to intrude. I'll go. Next time I'll call."

"Good."

She's going! Shit! I scamper quickly up the hallway to Edward's bedroom and sit down on the bed.

Edward enters a few minutes later.

"She's gone," he says warily, gauging my reaction.

I gaze up at him, trying to frame my question.

"I want you to tell me all about her. I need to understand why you think she helped you. I loathe her, Edward. I think she did you untold damage. You have no friends. Did she keep them away from you?"

He sighs and runs his hand through his hair.

"What the fuck do you want to know about her? We had a very long-standing affair, she beat the shit out of me often, and I fucked her in all sorts of ways you can't even imagine."

I pale. Shit, he's angry – with me. I blink at him.

"Why are you so angry?"

"Because all of that shit is OVER," he shouts.

He sighs in exasperation, running both hands through his hair.

I blanch. Shit. I look down at my hands, knotted in my lap. I just want to understand. He sits down beside me.

"What do you want to know?" he asks wearily.

"You don't have to tell me. I don't mean to intrude."

"Isabella, it's not that. I've lived in a bubble for years, with nothing affecting me. She's always been there as a confidante. And now my past and my future are colliding in a way I never thought possible…"

I glance up at him and he's staring at me.

"I never thought I had a future with anyone, Isabella. You give me hope and possibilities and you get me thinking about all sorts of different scenarios…" He drifts off.

"I was listening," I whisper and stare back down at my hands.

"What? To our conversation?"

"Yes."

"Well?" He sounds resigned.

"She cares for you."

"Yes, she does. And I for her, in my own way, but it doesn't come close to how I feel about you. If that's what this is about."

"I'm not jealous," I blurt, wounded that he would think that… or am I? Holy cow. Maybe that's what this is.

"You don't love her," I murmur.

He sighs again. He really is pissed.

"A long time ago, I thought I loved her," he says softly, but through gritted teeth.

Oh…

"So when we were in Florida… you said you didn't love her."

"That's right."

I frown.

"I loved you then, Isabella," he whispers. "You're the only person I'd fly 3,000 miles to see."

Oh… my. I don't understand. He still wanted me as sub then. I frown at him.

"The feelings I have for you are very different from any I ever had for Irina," he says by way of explanation.

"When did you know?"

He shrugs.

"Ironically, it was Irina who pointed it out to me. She encouraged me to go to Florida."

Shit… I knew it! I knew it in Jacksonville. I gaze at him. What do I make of this? Maybe she *is* on my side, and just worried that I'll hurt him. The thought is painful. I would never want to hurt him. She's right – he's been hurt enough. Perhaps she's not so bad. I shake my head. I don't want to accept his relationship with her. I disapprove. Yes, that's what this is. She's an unsavory character who preyed on a vulnerable adolescent, robbing him of his teenage years, no matter what he says.

"So you desired her? When you were younger."

"Yes."

Oh.

"She taught me a great deal. She taught me to believe in myself."

Oh.

"But she also beat the shit out of you."

He smiles fondly. "Yes, she did."

"And you liked that?"

"At the time I did."

"So much that you wanted to do it to others?"

His eyes grow wide and serious.

"Yes."

"Did she help you with that?"

"Yes."

"Did she sub for you?"

"Yes."

Holy crap.

"Do you expect me to like her?" My voice sounds brittle and bitter.

"No. Though it would make my life a hell of a lot easier," he says wearily. "I do understand your reticence."

"Reticence! Jeez, Edward – if that was your son, how would you feel?"

He blinks at me, as though he doesn't comprehend the question. He frowns.

"I didn't have to stay with her. It was my choice too, Isabella," he murmurs.

This is getting me nowhere.

"Who's Linc?"

"Her ex-husband."

"Oh… Lincoln Timber?"

"The very same," he smirks.

"And Seth?"

"Her current submissive."

Oh no.

"He's in his mid-twenties Isabella. You know – a consenting adult," he adds quickly, correctly deciphering my look of disgust.

I flush.

"Your age."

"Look Isabella, as I said to her, she's part of my past. You are my future. Don't let her come between us, please. And quite frankly, I'm really bored of this subject. I'm going to do some work." He stands and gazes down at me. "Let it go. Please."

I stare mulishly up at him.

"Oh, I almost forgot," he adds. "Your car arrived earlier. It's in the garage. Taylor has the key."

Whoa… the Saab?

"Can I drive it tomorrow?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"You know why not. And that reminds me. If you are going to leave your office, let me know. Stuart was there, watching you. It seems I can't trust you to look after yourself at all." He scowls down at me, making me feel like an errant child – again. And I would argue with him, but he's pretty worked up over Irina. I don't want to push him any further, but I can't resist one comment.

"Seems I can't trust you either," I mutter. "You could have told me Stuart was watching me."

"Do you want to fight about that, too?" he snaps at me.

"I wasn't aware we were fighting. I thought we were communicating," I mumble petulantly.

He closes his eyes briefly as he struggles to contain his temper. I swallow and watch anxiously. Jeez, this could go either way.

"I have to work," he says quietly, and with that he leaves the room.

I exhale. I hadn't realised I'd been holding my breath. I flop backwards on to the bed, staring at the ceiling.

Can we ever have a normal conversation without it disintegrating into an argument? It's exhausting. We just don't know each other that well. Do I really want to move in with him? I don't even know if I should make him a cup of tea or coffee while he's working. Should I disturb him at all? I have no idea of his likes and dislikes. Evidently he's bored with the whole Irina thing – I need to move on. He's right. Let it go. Well, at least he's not expecting me to be friends with her, and hopefully she'll now stop hassling me for a meeting.

I get up off the bed and wander to the window. I unlock the balcony door, open it and and stroll over to the glass railing. Its transparency is unnerving. The air's chilly, as I'm up so high, and I gaze out over the twinkling lights of Seattle. He's so far removed from everything up here, in his fortress. Jeez, he's just told me he loves me, then all this crap comes up with that… dreadful woman. I roll my eyes. His life is so complicated. *He's* so complicated.

With a heavy sigh, and a last glance at Seattle spread like cloths of gold at my feet, I decide to call Charlie. I haven't spoken to him for ages. It's a brief conversation as per usual, but I ascertain he's fine, and that I'm interrupting an important game.

"Hope all is well with Edward," he says casually.

"Yeah. We're cool." Sort of… and I'm moving in with him. Though we haven't discussed a timetable.

"Love you, Dad."

"Love you too, Bells."

I hang up and check my watch. It's only ten. Because of our discussion, I am feeling strangely innervated and restless. I shower quickly, and back in the bedroom decide to wear

one of the nightdresses that Caroline Acton procured for me from Neiman Marcus. Edward's always moaning about my t-shirts. There are three; I choose the pale pink, and put it on over my head. The fabric skims across my skin, caressing and clinging to me as it falls around my body. It feels luxurious – the finest satin. Holy crap, I look like a 1930s movie star. It's long, elegant – and very un-me. I grab the matching robe and decide to hunt out a book in the library. I'll leave Edward alone. Perhaps he will recover his good humor once he's finished working.

There are so many books in Edward's library. Scanning every title will take forever. I glance occasionally at the billiard table and flush as I recall our previous evening. And I smile when I see that the ruler is still on the floor. I pick it up and swat my palm. Ow! It stings. Why can't I take a little more pain for my man? Disconsolately, I place it on the desk and continue my hunt for a good read.

Most of the books are first editions. How can he have amassed a collection like this in such a short time? Perhaps Taylor's job description includes book buying. I settle on Rebecca by Daphne Du Maurier. I haven't read this for a long time. I smile as I curl up in one of the overstuffed armchairs and read the first line:

Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again.

I am jostled awake as Edward lifts me in his arms.

"Hey," he says softly. "You fell asleep. I couldn't find you." I can feel him nuzzle my hair. Sleepily, I put my arms around his neck and breathe in his scent – oh he smells so good – as he carries me back to the bedroom. He lays me down on the bed and covers me.

"Sleep, baby," he murmurs. I feel his lips press against my forehead and I drift.

I wake suddenly from a disturbing dream which eludes me. I am momentarily disorientated, and I find myself anxiously glancing at the end of the bed, but there's no one there. I can hear the faint strains of a complex melody from the piano. What time is it? I check out the radio alarm – two in the morning. Has Edward come to sleep at all? I slowly clamber out of bed, after I disentangle my legs from my robe, which I am still wearing. Perhaps that's what woke me. I wander through to the great room and stand in the shadows, listening. Edward is lost to the music, completely. He looks safe and secure in his bubble of light. And the tune he plays… it's a lilting melody, parts of which sound familiar, but so elaborate. Jeez, he's good. Why does this always take me by surprise? The whole scene looks different somehow, and I realize that the piano lid is down, and I can see him clearly. He glances up and our eyes lock, his green and softly luminous in the diffuse glow of the lamp. He continues to play, not faltering at all, as I slowly make my way over to him. His eyes follow me, drinking me in, burning brighter. As I reach him he stops.

"Oh… why did you stop? That was lovely."

"Do you have any idea how desirable you look at the moment?" he breathes.

Oh.

"Come to bed," I whisper and his eyes heat as he holds out his hand. I take it and he tugs unexpectedly so I fall into his lap. He wraps his arms around me and nuzzles my neck, behind my ear… oh…

"Why do we fight?" he whispers, as his teeth graze my earlobe, sending shivers through me. Holy cow. My heart skips a beat, and then starts pounding, coursing heat throughout my body.

"Because we're getting to know each other, and you're stubborn and cantankerous and moody and difficult," I murmur breathlessly, shifting my head to give him better access to my throat. He runs his nose down my neck, and I feel him smile.

"I am all those things, Miss Swan. It's a wonder you put up with me." He nips my earlobe.

And I groan.

"Is it always like this?" he breathes.

"I have no idea."

"Me neither." He yanks at the sash of my robe so it falls open and his hand skims down my body over my breast. I feel my nipples harden beneath his gentle touch, and strain against the satin. He continues down to my waist… to my hip.

"Oh, you feel so fine under this material, and I can see everything – even this." He tugs gently at my pubic hair through the fabric, and I gasp, and moan, and his other hand fists in the hair at my nape. Pulling my head back he kisses me, his tongue urgent, relentless, needy. I moan in response and caress his dear, dear face. His hand gently pulls my nightdress up, slowly, tantalizingly, until he's fondling my behind, and then running his thumbnail down the inside of my thigh.

Suddenly he rises, startling me, and he lifts me bodily on to the piano. My feet rest on the keys, sounding discordant, disjointed notes, and his hands skim up my legs and part my knees.

"Lie back," he orders, holding my hands to support me while I sink back on top of the piano. The lid is hard and uncompromising against my back. He lets go of me and pushes my legs open wider, my feet dancing on the keys, to the lower and higher notes. Oh boy. I

know what he's going to do, and the anticipation… I groan loudly as he kisses the inside of my knee, then kisses and sucks and nips his way higher up my leg, to my thigh. I can feel the soft satin rising higher as he pushes the skirt up. I flex my feet… the chords sound again. Closing my eyes, I surrender myself to him, as his mouth reaches the apex of my thighs.

He kisses me… *there*… oh boy… then gently blows, before I feel his tongue circling my clitoris, as he pushes my legs wider. I feel so open – so exposed – and he holds me in place, his hands just above my knees, as his tongue tortures me, no let-up. My hips tilt up, moving to their own rhythm as he consumes me.

"Oh, Edward, please," I moan.

"Oh no, baby, not yet," he teases, but I can feel myself quicken, as can he… and he stops.

"No," I whimper.

"This is my revenge, Bella," he growls softly. "Argue with me and I am going to take it out on your body somehow." He kisses me along my belly, his hands traveling up my thighs, stroking, kneading, tantalizing. His tongue circles my navel, as his hands reach the summit of my thighs, and his thumbs….

"Ah!" I cry out as he pushes one thumb inside me. The other persecutes me, slowly, agonizingly, circling around and around. My back arches off the piano as I writhe beneath his touch. It's almost unbearable.

"Edward," I cry, spiraling out of control with need.

He takes pity on me and stops. Lifting my feet off the keys, he pushes me, and suddenly I'm sliding effortlessly up the piano, and he's following me up there, briefly kneeling between my legs to roll on a condom. He hovers over me and I'm panting, gazing up at him with raging need, and I realize he's naked. When did he take off his clothes?

He stares down at me, and I can see the wonder in his eyes, the love, the passion, and it's breathtaking.

"I want you so badly," he says and very slowly, exquisitely, he sinks into me.

I am sprawled on top of him, wrung out, my limbs heavy and languid. Oh my. He's much more comfortable to lie on than the piano. Careful not to touch his chest, I rest my cheek against him and keep perfectly still. He doesn't object and I listen to his breathing as it slows, just like mine, and he gently strokes my hair.

"Do you drink tea or coffee in the evening?" I ask sleepily.

"What a strange question," he says dreamily.

"Well, I thought I could bring you tea in your study… and then I realized I didn't know what you would like…"

"Oh, I see. Water or wine in the evening, Bella. Though maybe I should try tea."

His hand moves rhythmically down my back, and it's so comforting.

"We really know very little about each other," I murmur.

"I know," he says, and his voice is mournful. I can't help but sit up to gaze at him.

"What is it?" I ask.

He shakes his head as if to rid himself of some unpleasant thought and raising his hand he caresses my cheek, his green eyes bright and earnest.

"I love you, Bella Swan," he says.

Chapter 74

The alarm blasts on with the six am traffic news and I am rudely awakened from my disturbing dream of over-blond and dark-haired women. I can't grasp what it's about, and I'm immediately distracted because Edward Cullen is wrapped around me, his copper-haired head on my chest, his hand on my breast, his leg over me, holding me down. He's still asleep, and I am too warm. But I ignore my discomfort, tentatively reaching up to run my fingers gently through his hair, and he stirs. Raising bright green eyes to me, he grins sleepily. Holy cow… he's adorable.

"Good morning, beautiful," he says.

"Good morning, beautiful yourself." I smile back at him.

He kisses me briefly and disentangling himself, leans up on his elbow, staring down at me.

"Sleep okay?" he asks.

"Yes, in spite of the interruption to my sleep last night."

His grin broadens. "Hmmm. You can interrupt me like that anytime." He kisses me quickly again.

"How about you? Did you sleep well?"

"I always sleep well with you, Isabella."

"No more nightmares?"

"No."

I frown, and chance a question.

"What are your nightmares about?"

His brow creases and his grin fades. Shit – my stupid curiosity.

"Oh… They're flashbacks really, to my early childhood, or so Dr Banner says. Some vivid. Some less so." His voice drops and a distant, harrowed look crosses his face. Absentmindedly, he begins to trace my collarbone with his finger, distracting me.

"Do you wake up crying and screaming?" I try in vain to joke.

He looks at me, puzzled.

"No, Isabella. I've never cried, ever. As far as I can remember." He frowns, as if reaching into the depths of his memories.

Oh no – that's too dark a place to go at this hour, surely.

"Do you have any happy memories of your childhood?" I ask quickly, mainly to distract him. He looks pensive for a moment, still running his finger along my skin.

"I do recall the crack whore baking. I remember the smell. A birthday cake I think. For me. And then there's Alice's arrival with my mom and dad, and how my mom was worried about my reaction. But I adored baby Alice immediately. My first word was 'Alice.' And I remember my first piano lesson. Miss Kathie, my tutor, was awesome." He smiles wistfully.

"You said your mom saved you. How?"

His reverie is broken and he gazes at me as if I don't understand the simple math of two plus two.

"She adopted me," he says simply. "I thought she was an angel when I first met her. She was dressed in soft white… I'll never forget that. Yes, another happy memory. If she'd said no to Carlisle…." He shrugs and glances over his shoulder at the radio alarm. "This is all a little deep for so early in the morning," he mutters.

"I have made a vow to get to know you better."

"Did you now, Miss Swan? I thought you wanted to know if I preferred coffee or tea." He smirks. "Anyway, I can think of one way you can get to know me." He pushes his hips suggestively against me.

"I think I know you quite well enough that way." My voice is haughty and scolding, and it makes him smile more broadly.

"Oh, I don't think I'll ever get to know you well enough that way," he murmurs. "You know, there are definite advantages to waking up beside you." His voice is soft, and bone-meltingly seductive.

"Don't you have to get up?" My voice is low and husky. Jeez, what he does to me…

"Not this morning. Only one place I want to be up right now, Miss Swan." And his eyes sparkle salaciously.

"Edward!" I gasp, shocked.

He shifts suddenly so that he's on top of me, pressing me into the bed. He grabs my hands and pulls them up above my head and begins to kiss my throat.

"Oh, Miss Swan," he breathes against my skin, sending delicious shivers through me, as his hand travels down my body and starts to slowly hitch up my satin nightdress. "Oh, what I'd like to do to you," he murmurs.

And I am lost, interrogation over.

Mrs. Cope sets down my breakfast of pancakes and bacon, and for Edward an omelet and bacon. We sit side by side at the breakfast bar in a comfortable silence.

"When am I going to meet your trainer Laurent, and put him through his paces?" I ask. Edward glances down at me, grinning.

"Depends if you want to go to New York this weekend or not. Unless you'd like to see him early one morning this week, or in the evening. I'll ask Angela to check on his schedule and come back to you."

"Angela?"

"My PA."

Oh yes.

"One of your many blonds," I tease him.

"She's not mine. She works for me. You're mine."

"I work for you," I mutter sourly.

"Oh yes," he grins as if he's forgotten. "So you do."

And his wide beaming smile is infectious.

"Maybe Laurent can teach me to kick box," I warn mockingly.

"Oh yeah? Fancy your chances against me?" Edward raises an eyebrow, amused. "Bring it on, Miss Swan," he says. He is so damned happy compared to yesterday's foul mood after

Irina left. It's totally disarming. Maybe it's all the sex… perhaps that's what's making him so buoyant. I glance behind me at the piano, savoring the memory of last night.

"You put the lid of the piano back up." I flush with my comment.

"I closed it last night so as not to disturb you. Guess it didn't work, but I'm glad it didn't." Edwards' lips twitch into a lascivious smile as he takes a bite of omelet.

I go crimson and smirk back at him. Oh yes… fun times on the piano.

Mrs. Cope leans over and places a paper bag containing my lunch in front of me, making me flush guiltily.

"For later, Bella. Tuna okay?"

"Oh yes. Thank you, Mrs. Cope." I give her a shy smile, which she reciprocates warmly before leaving the great room. I suspect it's to give us some privacy.

"Can I ask you something?" I turn back to Edward.

His amused expression slips slightly.

"Of course."

"And you won't be angry?"

"Is it about Irina?"

"No."

"Then I won't be angry."

"But I now have a supplementary question."

"Oh?"

"Which is about her."

He rolls his eyes.

"What?" he says, and now he's exasperated.

"Why do you get so mad when I ask you about her?"

"Honestly?"

I scowl at him.

"I thought you were always honest with me."

"I endeavor to be."

I narrow my eyes at him.

"That sounds like a very evasive answer."

"I am always honest with you, Bella. I don't want to play games. Well, not those sorts of games," he qualifies, and his eyes heat.

"What sort of games do you want to play?"

He cocks his head to one side and smirks at me.

"Miss Swan, you are so easily distracted."

I giggle… he's right.

"Mr. Cullen, you are distracting on so many levels."

I gaze at his dancing green eyes alight with humor.

"My favorite sound in the whole world is your giggle, Isabella. Now – what was your original question?" he asks smoothly, and I think he's laughing at me.

I try and twist my mouth at him to show my displeasure, but I like playful Fifty – he's fun. Nothing like some early morning banter and I love it. I frown, trying to recall my question.

"Oh yes. You only saw your subs at weekends?"

"Yes, that's correct," he says regarding me nervously.

I grin at him.

"So, no sex during the week."

He laughs.

"Oh, that's where we're going with this." He looks vaguely relieved. "Why do you think I work out every weekday, Isabella?" Now he really is laughing at me, but I don't care. I want to hug myself with glee. Another first – well, several firsts. "You look very pleased with yourself, Miss Swan."

"I am, Mr. Cullen."

"You should be." He grins. "Now eat your breakfast."

Oh, bossy Fifty… he's never far away.

We are in the back of the Mercedes. Taylor is driving with the intention of dropping me off at work, then Edward. Stuart is riding shotgun.

"Didn't you say your roommate's brother was arriving today?" Edward asks, almost casually, his voice and expression giving nothing away.

"Oh, Jasper," I gasp. "I forgot. Oh Edward, thank you for reminding me. I'll have to go back to the apartment."

His face falls slightly.

"What time?"

"I'm not sure what time he's arriving."

"I don't want you going anywhere on your own," he says sharply.

"I know," I mutter, and resist rolling my eyes at Mr. Over-Reaction. "Will Stuart be spying – errr… patrolling today?" I glance slyly in Stuart's direction to see the backs of his ears turn red.

"Yes," Edward snaps, his eyes glacial.

"If I was driving the Saab it would be easier," I mutter petulantly.

"Stuart will have a car, and he can drive you to your apartment, depending on what time."

"Look, I think Jasper will probably contact me during the day. I'll let you know what the plans are then."

He gazes at me, saying nothing. Oh, what is he thinking?

"Okay," he acquiesces. "Nowhere on your own. Do you understand?" He waves a long finger at me.

"Yes, dear," I mutter.

I can see the trace of a smile on his face.

"And maybe you should just use your Blackberry – I'll email you on it. That should prevent my IT guy having a thoroughly interesting morning, okay?" His voice is sardonic.

"Yes Edward." I can't resist… I roll my eyes at him, and he smirks at me.

"Why Miss Swan, I do believe you're making my palm twitch."

"Ah, Mr. Cullen, your perpetually twitching palm. What are we going to do with that?" I challenge him, and he laughs.

He's distracted by his BlackBerry, which must be on vibrate, because it doesn't ring. He frowns when he sees the caller ID.

"What is it?" he snaps into the phone, then listens intently. I can't help but study his lovely features… his nose, his hair hanging scruffily over his forehead. I am distracted from my surreptitious ogling by his expression, which turns from incredulity to amusement. I pay attention.

"You're kidding... When did he tell you this?" Edward chuckles, almost reluctantly. "No, don't worry. You don't have to apologize. I'm glad there's a logical explanation. It did seem a ridiculously low amount of money… I have no doubt you've something evil planned." He smiles. "Good… Goodbye." He snaps the phone shut, and glances at me, his eyes suddenly wary, but oddly, he looks relieved too.

"Who was that?" I ask.

"You really want to know?" he asks quietly.

And I know.

"No," I mutter and stare out of my window at the grey Seattle day, feeling suddenly forlorn. *Why can't she leave him alone?*

"Hey." He reaches for my hand and kisses each of my knuckles in turn, and suddenly he's sucking my little finger… hard. Then biting it softly. Holy crow. All my muscles deep in my belly liquefy and tighten at once. I gasp and glance nervously at Taylor and Stuart, then at Edward, and his eyes are darker. He smiles a slow carnal smile at me.

"Don't sweat it, Isabella," he murmurs. "She's in the past." And he plants a kiss in the center of my palm, sending tingles … everywhere … my momentary pique is forgotten.

"Morning, Bella." James smiles at me as I make my way to my desk. "Nice dress."

I flush. The dress is part of my new wardrobe, courtesy of my incredibly rich boyfriend. It's a sleeveless shift-dress of pale blue linen, quite fitted, and I'm wearing cream high-heeled sandals. Edward likes heels, I think. I smile secretly at the thought but quickly recover my bland professional work smile for my boss.

"Morning, James."

I set about ordering a messenger to take his brochure to the printers. He pops his head around his office door.

"Could I have a coffee please, Bella?"

"Sure."

I wander into the kitchen and bump into Claire from reception, who's also fixing coffee.

"Hey, Bella," she says cheerfully.

"Hi, Claire."

We chat briefly about her extended-family gathering at the weekend, which she enjoyed immensely, and I tell her shyly about sailing with Edward.

"Your boyfriend is so dreamy, Bella," she says, her eyes glazing over.

I am tempted to roll my eyes at her.

"He's not bad-looking," I smile.

And we both start laughing.

-

"You took your time!" James snaps when I bring in his coffee.

Oh!

"I'm sorry." I flush… and frown. I took the usual amount of time. What's his problem? Perhaps he's nervous about something.

He shakes his head.

"Sorry, Bella. I didn't mean to bark at you, honey."

Honey?

"There's something going on at senior management level, and I don't know what it is. Keep your ear to the ground, okay? If you hear anything… I know how you girls talk." He grins at me, and I feel slightly sick. He has no idea how we 'girls' talk. Besides, I know what's happening.

"You'll let me know, right?"

"Sure," I mutter. "I've sent the brochure to the printers. It will be back by two o'clock."

"Great. Here…" He hands me a pile of manuscripts. "All these need synopses of the first chapter, then filing."

"I'll get on it."

I am relieved to step out of his office and sit down at my desk. Oh, it's so hard being in the know. What will he do when he finds out? My blood runs cold. Something tells me James will be seriously fucked off. I glance quickly at my BlackBerry, and smile. There's an email from Edward.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Sunrise
Date: 16 June 2009 09.23
To: Isabella Swan

I love waking up to you in the morning.

Edward Cullen,
Completely & Utterly Smitten CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I think my face splits in two with my grin and my inner goddess back-flips over her chaise longue.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Sundown
Date: 16 June 2009: 09.35
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Completely And Utterly Smitten
I love waking up to you, too. But I love being in bed with you, and in elevators and on pianos and billiard tables and boats and desks and showers and bathtubs and strange wooden crosses with shackles and four-poster-beds-with-red-satin-sheets and boathouses and childhood bedrooms.

Yours

Sex Mad and Insatiable.
xx

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Wet Hardware
Date: 16 June 2009 09.37
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Sex Mad and Insatiable
I've just spat coffee all over my keyboard.
I don't think that's ever happened to me before.
I do admire a woman who concentrates on geography.
Am I to infer you just want me for my body?

Edward Cullen,
Completely & Utterly Shocked CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Giggling – and wet too…
Date: 16 June 2009: 09.42
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Utterly Shocked
Always.

I have work to do.
Stop bothering me.

SM&I
xx

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Do I have to?
Date: 16 June 2009 09.50
To: Isabella Swan

Dear SM&I
As ever, your wish is my command.
Love that you are giggling and wet.
Laters, baby.

x

Edward Cullen,
Completely & Utterly Smitten, Shocked and Spellbound CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I put the BlackBerry down and get on with my work.

At lunchtime, James asks me to go down to the deli for his lunch. I call Edward as soon as I leave James's office.

"Isabella." He answers almost immediately, his voice warm and caressing. How is it that this man can make me melt over the phone?

"Edward, James has asked me to get his lunch."

"Lazy bastard," Edward gripes. I ignore him and continue.

"So I'm going to get it. It might be handy if you gave me Stuart's number, so I don't have to bother you."

"Oh, it's no bother baby."

"Are you on your own?"

"No. There are six people staring at me at the moment wondering who the hell I'm talking to."

Shit…

"Really?" I gasp, panicked.

"Yes. Really. My girlfriend," he announces away from the phone.

Holy crow!

"They probably all thought you were gay, you know."

He laughs.

"Yeah, probably." And I can hear his grin.

"Err – I'd better go." I am sure he can tell how embarrassed I am to be interrupting him.

He laughs again.

"I'll let Stuart know. Have you heard from your friend?"

"Not yet. You'll be the first to know, Mr. Cullen."

"Good. Laters, Baby."

"Bye, Edward." I grin. Every time he says that, it makes me smile. So un-Fifty, but somehow so him, too.

-

When I exit moments later, Stuart is waiting on the doorstep of the building.

"Miss Swan," he greets me formally.

"Stuart." I nod in response and together we head down to the deli.

I don't feel as comfortable with Stuart as I do with Taylor. He continually scans the street as we make our way along the block. It actually makes me more nervous, and I find myself mirroring his actions. Is Lauren out there? Or are we all infected by Edward's paranoia? Is

this part of his fifty-shades? What I'd give for half an hour of candid discussion with Dr. Banner, to find out.

There's nothing amiss, just lunchtime Seattle – people rushing for lunch, shopping, meeting friends. I watch two young women hug as they meet up. I miss Rose. It's only been two weeks since she left, but it feels like the longest two weeks of my life. So much has happened – she'll never believe me when I tell her. Well, tell her the edited NDA-compliant version. I frown. I'll have to talk to Edward about that. I don't recall seeing the NDA in the personal file that he handed to me. What would Rose make of it? I blanch at the thought. Perhaps she'll be back with Jasper. I feel a rush of excitement at the thought, but it's dampened by a vague memory of her saying that she and Emmett would stay on in Barbados for a few days.

"Where do you stand when you're waiting and watching outside?" I ask Stuart as we get in line for lunch. Stuart is in front of me, facing the door, continually monitoring the street and anyone who comes in. It's unnerving.

"I sit in the coffee shop directly across the street, Miss Swan."

"Doesn't it get very boring?"

"Not to me, ma'am. It's what I do," he says stiffly.

I flush.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to imply…" my voice trails off at his kind, understanding expression.

"Please, Miss Swan. My job is to protect you. And that's what I'll do."

"So, no sign of Lauren."

"No ma'am."

I frown.

"How do you know what she looks like?"

"I've seen her photograph."

"Oh… do you have it on you?"

"No ma'am." He taps his skull. "Committed to memory."

Of course.

I'd really like to examine a photograph of Lauren. I wonder if Edward would let me have a copy? Yes, he probably would – for my safety. I hatch a plan, and my subconscious gloats and nods approvingly.

The brochures arrive back at the office, and I have to say, they look great. I take one into James's office. His eyes light up, and I don't know if it's at me, or the brochure. I choose to believe it's the latter.

"These look great, Bella." Idly, he flicks through it. "Yeah, good job. Are you seeing your boyfriend this evening?"

"Yes. We live together." It's sort of the truth... Well, we do at the moment. And I have officially agreed to move in, so it's not much of a white lie. Hopefully it's enough to throw him off the scent.

"Would he object to you coming out for a quick drink tonight? To celebrate all your hard work?"

"Actually, I have a friend coming in from out of town tonight, and… err – we're all going out for dinner." *And I'll be busy every night, James...*

"I see." He sighs slightly, and I can tell he's exasperated. "Maybe when I'm back from New York, huh?" He raises his eyebrows expectantly, and his gaze darkens suggestively.

Oh no. I smile, non-committal, stifling a shudder.

"Would you like some coffee, or tea?" I ask.

"Coffee please." His voice is low and husky, like he's asking for something else. *Fuck.* He's not going to back off, I can see that now. Oh… What to do?

I breathe a long sigh of relief when I am out of his office. He makes me tense. Edward is right about him, and part of me is pissed that Edward is right about him.

I sit down at my desk and my BlackBerry rings – a number I don't recognize.

"Bella Swan."

"Hi, Darling!" Jasper's drawl catches me momentarily off guard.

"Jasper! How are you?" I almost squeal with delight.

"Glad to be back. I am seriously fed up with sunshine and rum punches, and my twin sister being hopelessly in love with the big guy. It's been hell, Bella."

"Oh sea, sand, sun, and rum punches… sounds like Dante's Inferno," I giggle. "Where are you?"

"I'm at Sea Tac, waiting for my bag. What are you doing?"

"I'm at work. Yes, I am gainfully employed," I respond to his gasp. "Now, do you want to come here and collect the keys? I can meet you later at the apartment."

"Sounds great. I'll see you in about 45 minutes – an hour maybe? What's the address?"

I quickly give him SIP's address.

"See you soon, Jasper."

"Laters, baby." And he hangs up.

What? Not Jasper too? And it dawns on me that he's just spent a week with Emmett. I quickly type an email to Edward.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Visitors from Sunny Climes.
Date: 16 June 2009: 14.55
To: Edward Cullen

Dearest Completely and Utterly SS&S
Jasper is back, and he's coming here to collect keys to the apartment.
I'd really like to make sure he's settled in okay.
Why don't you collect me after work? We can go to the apartment, then we can ALL go out for a meal maybe? My treat?

Your

Bella x
Still SM&I

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Dinner Out
Date: 16 June 2009 15.05
To: Isabella Swan

This sounds like a plan I can approve of…
Except the part about you paying!
My treat.
I'll collect you at 6:00.

x

PS: Why aren't you using your BlackBerry!!!

Edward Cullen,
Completely and Utterly Annoyed, CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Bossiness
Date: 16 June 2009: 15.11
To: Edward Cullen

Oh, don't be so crusty and cross.
It's all in code.
I'll see you at 6:00.

Bella x

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Maddening Woman
Date: 16 June 2009 15.18
To: Isabella Swan

Crusty and cross!
I'll give you crust and cross…
And look forward to it.

Edward Cullen,
Completely and Utterly More Annoyed, but smiling for some unknown reason,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Promises. Promises.
Date: 16 June 2009: 15.23
To: Edward Cullen

Bring it on, Mr. Cullen… I look forward to it too. ;D.

Bella x

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

He doesn't reply, but then I don't expect him to. I can imagine him moaning about mixed signals, and the thought makes me smile. I daydream briefly about what he might do to me, but find myself shifting about in my chair. My subconscious gazes at me disapprovingly over her half moon specs – *get on with your work.*

A little later my phone buzzes. It's Claire at reception.

"There's a real cute guy in reception to see you. We must go out for drinks sometime, Bella. You sure know some hunky guys," she hisses conspiratorially down the phone.

Jasper!

Grabbing my keys from my purse I hurry out to the foyer.

Holy shit – sun-bleached blond hair, a tan to die for, and glowing hazel eyes gaze up at me from the green leather couch. As soon as he sees me his mouth drops open slightly and he's on his feet coming towards me.

"Wow, Bella…" He frowns slightly at me as he bends to give me hug.

"You look well." I grin up at him.

"You look… wow – different. Older… more sophisticated… What's happened? You changed your hair? Clothes? I don't know, Swan, but you look hot!"

I blush furiously.

"Oh, Jasper. I'm just in my work clothes," I scold, as Claire looks on with an arched eyebrow and a wry smile. "How was Barbados?"

"Fun," he says.

"When's Rose back?"

"She and Emmett are flying back Friday. They're pretty damn serious about each other." Jasper rolls his eyes.

"I've missed her."

"Yeah? How have you been doing with Mr. Mogul?"

"Mr. Mogul?" I snicker. "Well, it's been interesting. He's taking us out for dinner this evening."

"Cool." Jasper seems genuinely pleased. Phew!

"Here…" I hand him the keys. "You have the address?"

"Yeah. Laters." He leans over and kisses my cheek.

"Emmett's expression?"

"Yeah, kind of grows on you."

"It does. Laters." I smile at him as he collects his large shoulder bag from beside the green couch and exits the building.

When I turn, James is watching me from the far side of the foyer, his expression unreadable. I smile brightly at him and head back to my desk, feeling his eyes on me the whole time. This is beginning to get on my nerves. What to do? I have no idea. I'll have to wait until Rose is back. She's bound to come up with a plan. The thought dispels my bleak mood and I pick up the next manuscript.

At five to six my phone buzzes. It's Edward.

"Crusty and cross here," he says and I grin. He's still playful Fifty. My inner goddess is clapping her hands with glee like a small child.

"Well, this is Sex Mad and Insatiable. I take it you're outside?" I ask dryly.

"I am indeed, Miss Swan. Looking forward to seeing you." I can hear the seductive warmth of his voice and my heart flutters wildly.

"Ditto, Mr. Cullen. I'll be right out." I hang up.

I switch off my computer and gather up my purse and pale cream cardigan.

"I'm off now, James," I call through.

"Okay, Bella. Thanks for today, honey! Have a great evening."

"You too."

Why can't he be like that all the time? I don't understand him.

-

The Mercedes is parked on the sidewalk and Edward opens the rear door to get out as I approach. Oh my... he's beyond beautiful. He's taken off his jacket and he's wearing his grey pants… my favorite ones, that hang from his hips… in that way. How can this Greek god be meant for me? I find myself grinning like an idiot in answer to his own idiotic grin. He's spent the whole day acting like a boyfriend, in love… in love with me. This adorable, complex, flawed man is in love with me, and I with him. Joy bursts unexpectedly inside me, and I savor the moment as I feel briefly that I could conquer the world.

"Miss Swan, you look as captivating as you did this morning." Edward pulls me into his arms and kisses me soundly.

"Mr. Cullen… so do you."

"Let's go get your friend." He smiles down at me and opens the car door.

As Taylor heads to the apartment Edward fills me in on his day – a much better one than yesterday, it seems. I gaze at him adoringly as he attempts to explain some breakthrough the environmental science department at WSU in Vancouver has made. His words mean very little to me, but I can't help but be captivated by his passion and interest in this subject. Maybe this is what it will be like… good days and bad days… and if the good days are like this, well, I won't have much to complain about. He hands me a sheet of paper.

"These are the times that Laurent is free this week," he says.

Oh!

As we pull up to my apartment building, he fishes his BlackBerry from his pocket.

"Cullen," he answers. "Kate, what is it?" He listens intently and I can tell it's an involved conversation.

"I'll go and get Jasper. I'll be two minutes," I mouth at Edward and hold up two fingers.

He nods, obviously distracted by the call.

Taylor opens my door, smiling at me warmly. I grin at him. Jeez, even Taylor's feeling it too. I press the entry phone and shout happily into it.

"Hi Jasper, it's me. Let me in."

The door buzzes and I head upstairs to the apartment. It occurs to me that I have not been here since Saturday morning… that seems so long ago. Jasper has kindly left the front door open. I step into the apartment, and I don't know why, but suddenly I freeze, instinctively. Then I realize it's because the pale, wan figure standing by the kitchen island, holding a small revolver, is Lauren, and she's gazing impassively at me.

Chapter 75

Holy fuck. She's here, gazing at me blankly… holding a gun. My subconscious swoons into a dead faint and I don't think even smelling salts will bring her back.

I blink repeatedly at Lauren as my mind goes into overdrive. How did she get in? Where's Jasper? Holy shit! Where is Jasper? A creeping cold fear grips my heart, and my scalp prickles as each and every follicle on my head tightens with terror. What if she's harmed him? *Oh no.* I start breathing rapidly as adrenaline and bone-numbing dread courses through my body. Keep calm, keep calm – I repeat the mantra over and over in my head. She tilts her head to one side, regarding me as if I'm an exhibit in a freak show. Jeez, I'm not the freak here.

It feels like an eon has passed while I process all this, though in reality it is only a split second. Lauren is still there, with her blank look, her scruffy, ill-kempt disposition. She's still wearing that grubby trench coat, and she looks desperately in need of a wash. Her hair is greasy and lank, plastered against her head, and her eyes are a dull hazel, cloudy and vaguely confused.

In spite of the fact that my mouth has no moisture in whatsoever, I attempt to speak.

"Hi… Lauren, isn't it?" I rasp.

She smiles, but it's a disturbing curl of her lip rather than a true smile.

"She speaks," she whispers, and her voice is soft and hoarse at the same time, an eerie sound.

"Yes… I speak," I say gently, as if to a child. "Are you here alone?" *Where is Jasper?* My heart constricts at the thought that he might have come to some harm.

Her face falls… so much so that I think she's about to burst into tears, she looks so forlorn.

"Alone," she whispers. "Alone." And the depth of sadness in that one word is heart-wrenching. What does she mean? I am alone? She's alone? She's alone because she's harmed Jasper? *Oh… no…* I have to fight the choking fear clawing at my throat as tears threaten.

'What are you doing here? Can I help you?" My words are a calm gentle interrogation, in spite of the clawing fear in my throat. Her brow furrows slightly, as if she's completely befuddled by my questions. But she makes no violent move against me. Her hand is still relaxed around her gun. I take a different tack, trying to ignore my tightening scalp.

"Would you like some tea?" *Why am I asking her if she wants tea?* It's my Dad's answer to any emotional situation, resurfacing inappropriately. Jeez, he'd have a fit if he saw me right this minute – and he'd have disarmed her by now. She's not actually pointing that gun at me, perhaps I can move. She shakes her head and tilts her head from side to side as if stretching her neck.

I take a deep precious lungful of air, trying to calm my panicked breathing, and move towards the kitchen island.

She frowns slightly, as if she can't quite understand what I am doing, and shifts slightly so she is still facing me. I reach the kettle and with a shaking hand fill it from the faucet. As I move, my breathing eases. Yes, if she wanted me dead, surely she would have shot me by now. She's still watching me with an absent, slightly bemused curiosity. As I switch on the kettle, the thought of Jasper comes back to me. Is he hurt? Tied up?

"Is there anyone else in the apartment?" I ask tentatively.

She tilts her head the other way, and with her right hand – the hand not holding the revolver – she grabs a strand of her long greasy hair, and starts twirling and fiddling with it, pulling and twisting. It's obviously a nervous habit, and while I am distracted by this, I am struck once again by how much she resembles me. I hold my breath, waiting for her answer, the anxiety building, to an almost unbearable pitch.

"Alone. All alone," she murmurs.

I find this comforting. Maybe Jasper isn't here. The relief is empowering.

"Are you sure you don't want tea or coffee?"

"Not thirsty," she answers softly and she takes a cautious step towards me. My feeling of empowerment evaporates.*Fuck!* I start panting with fear again, feeling it surge, thick and rough, through my veins. In spite of this – and feeling beyond brave – I turn and fetch a couple of cups from the cupboard.

"What do you have that I don't?" she asks, her voice assuming the sing-song intonation of a child.

"What do you mean, Lauren?" I ask softly, as gently as I can.

"Master – Mr. Cullen – he lets you call him by his given name."

"I'm not his submissive, Lauren. Err… Master understands that I am unable… inadequate to fulfill that role."

She tilts her head the to the other side. It's wholly unnerving and unnatural as a gesture.

"In-ad-e-quate." She tests the word, sounding it out, seeing how it feels on her tongue. "But Master is happy. I have seen him – he laughs and smiles. These reactions are rare… very rare for him."

Oh!

"You look like me." Lauren changes tack, surprising me, her eyes seeming to focus on me properly for the first time. "Master likes obedient ones who look like you and me. The others, all the same… all the same… and yet you sleep in his bed. I saw you."

Shit! She was in the room. I didn't imagine it.

"You saw me in his bed?" I whisper.

"I never slept in Master's bed," she murmurs. She's like a fallen ethereal wraith. Half a person, she looks so slight, and in spite of the fact that she's holding a gun, I suddenly feel overwhelmed with sympathy for her.

Her hands flex around the weapon, and I can almost feel my eyes widen, threatening to pop from my head.

"Why does Master like us like this? It makes me think… something… something I can't grasp. Master is a dark man, but I love him."

No, no… he's not. I bristle internally. He's not dark. He's a good man, and he's not in the dark… he's joined me in the light. And now she's here, trying to drag him back, with some warped idea that she loves him.

"Lauren, do you want to give me the gun?" I ask softly.

Her hand grips it tightly and she hugs it to her chest.

"This is mine. It's all I have left." She gently caresses the gun. "So she can join her love."

Holy shit! Which love… Edward? It's like she's punched me in the stomach. He will be here, I know that, at some point in the very near future, he will come to find out what's keeping me. Does she mean to shoot him? The thought is so horrific I feel my throat swell and ache, as a huge knot forms there, almost choking me, matching the fear that's balled tightly in my belly.

And right on cue the door bursts open, and Edward is standing in the doorway, Taylor behind him. Glancing briefly towards me, Edward's eyes sweep over me from head to toe,

and I notice the small spark of relief in his look, but it's momentary as his gaze moves quickly to Lauren and freezes, focusing on her, not wavering in the slightest. He glares at her with an intensity I have not seen before, his eyes wild forest green – wide, angry, scared. Oh no… oh no. Lauren's eyes widen, and for a moment it seems her reason returns. She blinks rapidly, while her hand tightens once more around the gun. My breath catches in my throat and my heart starts thumping, so loud that I hear the blood pounding in my ears. *No, no, no!* My world teeters precariously in the hands of this poor, fucked-up woman. Will she shoot? Both of us? Edward? The thought is crippling. But after what seems an age, as time hangs suspended around us, her head dips slightly and she gazes up at him, through her long lashes, her expression… *contrite.*

Edward holds up his hand, signaling to Taylor to stay where he is. Taylor looks pale yet furious. I have never seen him that way, but he stands stock-still as Edward and Lauren stare at each other. I realize I've stopped breathing altogether. What will she do? What will he do? But they just continue to stare at each other. Edward's expression is raw, full of some unnamed emotion. It could be pity, fear, affection… or is it love? *No, please not love!*

His eyes bore into her, and agonizingly slowly, the atmosphere in the apartment changes. The tension is building, so that I can sense their connection, the charge between them. *No!* And suddenly I feel like I am intruding, as they stand gazing at each other. I feel like an outsider, a voyeur, spying on a forbidden, intimate scene behind closed curtains. Edward's intense gaze burns brighter, and his bearing changes subtly. He looks taller, more angular somehow, colder and more distant. I recognize this stance. I've seen him like this before – in his playroom. My scalp prickles anew. This is dominant Edward, and how at ease he looks. Whether he was born to or made for this role, I just don't know, but with a sinking heart and sickened stomach I watch as Lauren responds, her lips parting, her breathing picking up, as the first flush of color stains her cheeks. *No!* It's such an unwelcome glimpse into his past, agonizing to witness.

Finally, he mouths a word at her. I can't make out what it is, but the effect on Lauren is immediate. She drops to the floor, on her knees, her head bowed, and the gun falls and skitters uselessly across the wooden floor. *Holy fuck.* Edward walks calmly over to where the gun has fallen and bends gracefully to pick it up. He checks the safety, then slips it into the waistband of his trousers at his back. He gazes once more at Lauren as she kneels compliantly beside the kitchen island.

"Isabella, go with Taylor," Edward commands coolly. Taylor crosses the threshold and stares at me.

"Jasper," I whisper.

"Downstairs." He responds matter-of-factly, his eyes never leaving Lauren.

Downstairs. Not here. *Jasper's okay*. Relief floods, hard and fast through my veins, and for a moment I think I'm going to faint.

"Isabella, please," Edward warns.

I blink at him and I'm suddenly unable to move. I don't want to leave him – leave him with her. He moves to stand beside Lauren so that she kneels at his feet. He's hovering over her… *protectively*. She's so still… it's unnatural. I can't take my eyes off of the two of them – *together!*

"For the love of God, Isabella, will you do as you're told for once in your life, and *go!*" Edward's eyes lock with mine as he glowers at me, his voice a blistering cold shard of ice, and the anger beneath the quiet, deliberate delivery of his words is palpable. Angry at me? Surely not. *Please – No!* I feel like he's slapped me hard. Why does he want to stay with her?

"Taylor. Take Miss Swan downstairs. Now."

Taylor nods at him as I stare at Edward.

"Why?" I whisper.

"Go. Back to the apartment." His eyes blaze frostily at me. "I need to be alone with Lauren." He says it urgently. I think he's trying to convey some kind of message, but I'm so thrown by all what's happened that I'm not sure. I glance down at Lauren and notice a very small smile cross her lips, but otherwise she remains truly impassive. A complete submissive. *Fuck!* My heart chills.

This is what he needs. This is what he likes. *No!* I want to wail out loud.

"Miss Swan. Bella." Taylor holds his hand out to me, imploring me to come.

I am immobilized by the horrific spectacle before me. It confirms my worst fears and plays on all my insecurities: Edward and Lauren, together – the Dom and his sub.

"Taylor," Edward urges, and Taylor leans down and scoops me into his arms. The last thing I see as we leave is Edward, gently stroking Lauren's head, as he murmurs something softly to her. *No!*

As Taylor carries me down the stairs I lie limply in his arms trying to grasp what's happened in the last ten minutes – was it longer? Or shorter? The concept of time has deserted me.

Edward and Lauren, Lauren and Edward… together? What is he doing with her now?

-

"Jesus, Bella! What the fuck is going on?" I am relieved to see Jasper as he paces the small lobby, still carrying his large shoulder bag. *Oh, thank heavens he's okay!* When Taylor sets me down, I practically throw myself at Jasper, wrapping my arms around his neck.

"Jasper, you're okay. Oh, thank God."

I hug him, holding him close. I was so worried, and for a brief moment I enjoy some respite from my rising panic at what is unfolding upstairs in my apartment.

"What the fuck is going on, Bella? Who's this guy?"

"Oh, sorry, Jasper, this is Taylor. He works with Edward. Taylor, this is Jasper, my roommate's brother."

They nod at each other.

"Bella, upstairs, what's going on? I was fishing for the apartment keys when these guys jumped out of nowhere and grabbed them. One of them was Edward…" Jasper trails off.

"You were late… Thank God."

"Yeah. I met a friend from Pullman – we had a quick drink. Upstairs, what's going on?"

"There's a girl, an ex of Edward's. In our apartment. She's gone postal, and Edward is…" My voice cracks, and tears pool in my eyes.

"Hey," Jasper whispers, and pulls me close once more. "Has anyone called the cops?"

"No, it's not like that." I sob into his chest, and now I've started, I can't stop crying. The tension of this latest episode released through tears. I can feel Jasper's arms around me and his general bemusement.

"Hey, Bella, let's go get a drink." He pats my back, awkwardly, and suddenly I feel awkward too, and embarrassed, and in all honesty, I want to be on my own. But I nod, accepting his offer. I want to be away from here, away from whatever's going on upstairs.

I turn to Taylor.

"Was the apartment checked?" I ask him tearfully, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

"This afternoon." Taylor shrugs apologetically as he hands me a handkerchief. He looks devastated. "I'm sorry, Bella," he murmurs.

I frown. Jeez, he looks so guilty. I don't want to make him feel guilty.

"Taylor, she was in Edward's apartment for heaven knows how long," I mutter reassuringly.

"She does seem to have an uncanny ability to evade us." He scowls again, shaking his head.

"Jasper and I will go for a quick drink, and then head back to Escala." I dry my eyes.

Taylor shuffles from foot to foot uncomfortably.

"Mr. Cullen wanted you to go back to the apartment," he says quietly.

"Well, we know where Lauren is now." I can't keep the bitterness out of my voice. "So, no need for all the security. Tell Edward we'll see him later."

Taylor opens his mouth to speak, and then abruptly closes it again.

"Do you want to leave your bag with Taylor?" I ask Jasper.

"No, I'll keep it with me, thanks."

Jasper nods at Taylor, then ushers me out of the front door. Too late, I remember that I've left my purse in the back of Mercedes. I have nothing.

"My purse…"

"Don't worry," Jasper murmurs, his face full of concern. "It's cool, it's on me."

-

We choose a bar across the street, settling onto wooden bar stools by the window. I want to see what's going on – who's coming, and more importantly, who's going. Jasper hands me a bottle of beer.

"Trouble with an ex?" he says gently.

"It's a bit more complicated than that," I mutter, abruptly more guarded. I can't talk about this – I have signed an NDA, and for the first time, I really resent that fact, and that Edward's said nothing about rescinding it.

"I've got time," Jasper says kindly and takes a long slug of his beer.

"Well, she's an ex, from years back. She left her husband for some guy, then a couple of weeks or so ago, he was killed in a car crash, and now she's come after Edward." I shrug. There, that didn't give too much away.

"Come after him?"

"She had a gun."

"Fuck, no!"

"She didn't actually threaten anyone with it… I think she meant to harm herself. But that's why I was so worried about you. I didn't know if you were in the apartment," I murmur.

"I see. She sounds unstable."

"Yes, she is."

"And what's Edward doing with her now?"

I feel the blood drain from my face and bile rise in my throat.

"I don't know," I whisper.

Jasper's eyes widen slightly – at last he's got it. This is the crux of my problem. What the fuck *are* they doing? Talking, hopefully. Just talking. Yet all I can see in my mind's eye is his hand, tenderly stroking her hair. I rationalize to myself that she's disturbed and Edward cares about her. But in the back of my mind, my subconscious is shaking her head sadly… *it's more than that.*

Lauren was able to fulfill his needs in a way I cannot. The thought is depressing. I try to focus on all we've done in the last few days – his declaration of love, his flirty humor, his playfulness. But Irina's words keep coming back to taunt me. It's true what they say about eavesdroppers.

Don't you miss it… your playroom?

I finish my beer quickly, and Jasper lines up another. I am not much of companion, but to his credit he stays with me, chatting, trying to lift my spirits, talking about Barbados, and Rose and Emmett's antics, which is wonderfully distracting, but it's just that. A distraction. My mind, my heart, my soul, are all still in that apartment, with my Fifty Shades and the woman who used to be his submissive. A woman who thinks she still loves him. A woman who looks like me.

During our third beer, a large cruiser with blacked-out windows pulls up outside the front door of the apartment, next to the Mercedes. I recognize Dr. Banner as he climbs out, accompanied by a woman dressed in what looks like pale blue scrubs. I glimpse Taylor as he lets them in through the front door.

"Who's that?" Jasper asks.

"His name's Dr. Banner. Edward knows him."

"What kind of doctor?"

"A shrink."

"Oh."

We both watch, and a few minutes later they are back, and Edward is carrying Lauren, wrapped in a blanket. *What?* I watch horrified as they all climb into the cruiser and it speeds away. Jasper glances at me sympathetically – and I feel desolate, completely desolate.

"Can I have something a bit stronger?" I ask Jasper, my voice small.

"Sure. What would you like?"

"A brandy. Please."

Jasper nods and retreats to the bar. I gaze through the window at the front door. Moments later Taylor emerges, climbs into the Mercedes and heads off towards Escala… I think.

Jasper places a large brandy in front of me.

"Come on, Swan. Let's get drunk."

Sounds like the best offer I've had in a while. We clink glasses and I take a gulp of the burning amber liquid, the fiery heat a welcome distraction from the hideous blossoming pain in my heart.

It's late, and I feel fuzzy. Jasper and I are locked out of the apartment. He insists on walking me back to Escala, but he won't stay. He's called the friend he met earlier for a drink and arranged to crash with him.

"So this is where the Mogul lives." Jasper whistles through his teeth, impressed.

I nod.

"Sure you don't want me to come in with you?" he asks.

"No, I need to face this… or just go to bed."

"See you tomorrow?"

"Yes. Thanks Jasper." I hug him.

"You'll work it out, Swan," he murmurs against my ear. He releases me, and watches while I head into the building.

"Laters," he calls.

I offer him a weak smile and a wave, and press the button to call the elevator.

-

The elevator doors open, and I step into Edward's apartment. Taylor is not waiting, which is unusual. Opening the double doors, I head towards the great room. Edward is on the phone, pacing the room, near the piano.

"She's here," he snaps down the line. He turns to glare at me as he switches off his phone. "Where the fuck have you been?" he growls, but doesn't make a move towards me. Holy crow, he's angry with me? He's the one that just spent God knows how long with his loony ex-girlfriend, and *he's* angry with *me?*

"Have you been drinking?" he asks, appalled.

"A bit." I didn't think it was that obvious.

He gasps and runs his hand through his hair.

"I told you to come back here." His voice is menacingly quiet. "It's now fifteen after ten. I've been worried about you."

"I went for a drink or three with Jasper while you attended to your ex," I spit at him. "I didn't know how long you were going to be… with her."

He narrows his eyes, and takes a few paces towards me but stops.

"Why do you say it that like that?"

I shrug and stare down at my fingers.

"Bella, what's wrong?" And for the first time, I hear something other than anger in his voice. What… fear?

I swallow.

"Where's Lauren?"

"In a psychiatric hospital in Fremont," he says, and his face is scrutinizing mine. "Bella, what is it?" He moves towards me so that when I look up at him, he's standing right in front of me.

"What's wrong?" he breathes.

I shake my head.

"I'm no good for you."

"What?" he breathes, his eyes widening in alarm. "Why do you think that? How can you possibly think that?"

"I can't be everything you need."

"You are everything I need. Why do you do this to me?"

"Just seeing you with her…" My voice trails off.

"This is not about you, Bella. It's about her." He takes a sharp breath, running his hand through his hair again. "At the moment she's a very sick girl."

"But I felt it… what you had together."

"What? No." He reaches for me, and I step back, instinctively. He drops his hand, blinking at me. He looks seized with panic.

"You're running?" he whispers as his eyes widen with fear.

I say nothing.

"You can't," he pleads.

"Edward… I – "

"No. No!"

"I…"

He looks wildly round the room, for inspiration, or something.

"You can't go. Bella, I love you."

"I love you too, Edward, it's just…"

"No… no!" he says in desperation, and puts both hands on his head, and suddenly he drops, in front of me, to his knees… his head bowed, his long-fingered hands spread out on his thighs. He takes a deep breath and doesn't move.

What?

"Edward, what are you doing?"

He continues to stare down, not looking at me.

"Edward! *What are you doing?*" My voice is high-pitched. He doesn't move. "Edward, look at me!" I command.

His head sweeps up without hesitation, and he regards me impassively with his green gaze, calm, almost serene. Expectant and completely passive.

Holy Fuck… Edward. The submissive.

Chapter 76

Edward on his knees, at my feet, holding me with his steady green gaze, is the most chilling and sobering sight I have ever seen – more so than Lauren and her gun. The vague alcoholic fuzziness I feel evaporates in an instant, to be replaced by a prickling scalp and a creeping sense of doom as the blood drains from my face. I inhale sharply with shock.

No. No, this is wrong, so wrong, and so disturbing.

"Edward, please, don't do this. I don't want this."

He continues to regard me passively, not moving, saying nothing. *Oh fuck. My poor Fifty.* My heart squeezes and twists. What the hell have I done to him? I feel tears prick my eyes. *Oh no.*

"Why are you doing this? Talk to me," I whisper.

He blinks once.

"What would you like me to say?" he says softly, blandly, and I'm momentarily relieved that he's talking, but not like this – no. No. Tears begin to ooze down my cheeks, and suddenly this is all too much – to see him in the same prostrate position as the pathetic creature that was Lauren. The image of a powerful man who's really still a little boy, who was horrifically abused, hungry, lost – who feels unworthy of love from his perfect family and his much-less-than perfect girlfriend… it's overwhelmingly sad. Compassion, loss, despair all swell in my heart and I feel a choking sense of desperation. I am going to have to fight to bring him back. Bring back my Fifty…

The thought of me dominating anyone is appalling. The thought of dominating Edward is completely nauseating. It would make me like her – the woman who did this to him. I shudder at that thought, fighting the bile in my throat. No way can I do that. No way do I want that.

As my thoughts clear, I can see only one way… and I sink to my knees in front of him, the wooden floor hard on my knees, not taking my eyes off his, and I dash my tears away roughly with the back of my hand. Like this we are equals. We're on a level. This is the only way I am going to retrieve him.

His eyes widen fractionally as I stare up at him, but beyond that his expression and stance does not change.

"Edward, you don't have to do this." I plead. "I just wanted some time to think – some time to myself. I don't want to run. Edward, I've told you and told you and told you, I won't run.

All that's happened – it's so overwhelming. Why do you always assume the worst?" My heart clenches again because I know… it's because he's so doubting, so full of self-loathing. Irina's words come back to haunt me.

Does she know how negative you are about yourself? About all your issues?

Oh, Edward. Fear grips my heart once more.

"I was going to suggest going back to my apartment this evening. You never give me any time… time to think things through," I sob, and I see the ghost of a frown cross his face. "Just time to think. We barely know each other… and all this baggage that comes with you… I need – I just need time to think it through. And now that Lauren is – well, whatever she is – she's off the streets and not a threat…." My voice trails off and I stare at him. He regards me intently… listening, I hope. I continue.

"Seeing you with Lauren…" I close my eyes as the painful memory of his interaction with ex-sub gnaws at me anew. "It was such a shock. I had a glimpse into how your life has been… and…" I gaze down at my knotted fingers, tears still trickling down my cheeks. "This is about me not being good enough for you. It was an insight into your life, and I am so scared you'll get bored with me, and then you'll go… and I'll end up like Lauren – a shadow. Because I love you, Edward, and if you leave me, it will be like a world without light. I'll be in darkness. I don't want to run, Edward. I'm just so frightened you'll leave me…"

I realize, as I say these words to him – in the hope that he's listening – my real problem: I just don't get why he likes me. I have never got why he likes me.

"I don't understand why you find me attractive," I murmur. "You're, well… you're you… and I'm…" I shrug and gaze up at him. "I just don't see it. You're beautiful and sexy and successful and good and kind and caring – all those things… and I'm not. And I can't do the things you like to do. I can't give you what you need. How could you be happy with me? How can I possibly hold you?" I whisper. "I have never understood what you see in me. And seeing you with her… it brought all that home."

I sniff and wipe my nose with the back of my hand, gazing at his impassive expression. Oh, it's so exasperating. *Talk to me, damn it!*

"Are you going to kneel here all night? Because I'll do it too," I snap at him. I think his expression softens, maybe he even looks vaguely amused. But it's so hard to tell. I could reach across and touch him, but I feel this would be a gross abuse of the position he's put me in. I don't want that, but I don't know what he wants, or what he's trying to say to me. I just don't understand.

"Edward, please, please… talk to me," I beseech him, wringing my hands in my lap. I am so uncomfortable on my knees, but it hardly registers. I continue to kneel, staring at him, into his beautiful green serious eyes, and I wait.

And wait. And wait.

"Please," I beg once more.

His intense gaze darkens suddenly and he blinks.

"I was so scared," he whispers. *Oh, thank the Lord*. Inside, my subconscious staggers back into her armchair, sagging with relief, and takes a large swig of gin. He's talking! Gratitude runs fast and furious through me, and I swallow, trying to contain my emotion, and the fresh bout of tears that threatens.

He continues, quietly.

"When I saw Jasper, I knew someone had let you into your apartment. Both Taylor and I leapt out of the car. We knew." He pauses.

"And to see her there, like that, with you – and armed… I think I died a thousand deaths, Bella. Someone threatening you… all my worst fears realized. I was so angry, with her, with you, with Taylor… with myself." He shakes his head and I can see his agony.

"I didn't know how volatile she would be. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how she'd react." He stops and frowns. "And then she kind of gave me a clue – she looked so contrite – and I just knew what I had to do." He pauses, gazing at me, trying to gauge my reaction.

"Go on," I whisper.

He swallows.

"Seeing her in that state, knowing that I might have something to do with her mental breakdown…" He closes his eyes once more. "She was always so mischievous and lively." He shudders and takes a rasping breath, almost like a sob. This is torture to listen to, but I kneel, attentive, lapping up this insight.

"She might have harmed you. And it would have been my fault." His eyes drift off, filled with uncomprehending horror, and he's silent once more.

"But she didn't. And you weren't responsible for her being in that state, Edward," I whisper. I blink up at him, encouraging him to continue. But it dawns on me afresh that everything he did was to keep me safe, and perhaps Lauren, because he cares for her too. *But how*

much does he care for her? The question lingers in my head, unwelcome. He says he loves me, but then he was so harsh, throwing me out… sending me out of my own apartment.

"I just wanted you gone," he murmurs, with his uncanny ability to read my thoughts. "I wanted you away from the danger, and… You. Just. Wouldn't. Go," he whispers the last few words through clenched teeth and runs his hand though his hair. His exasperation is palpable. He gazes at me intently. "Isabella Swan, you are the most stubborn woman I know." He closes his eyes and shakes his head in disbelief.

Oh, he's back. I breathe a long cleansing sigh of relief.

He opens his eyes again and his expression is forlorn… sincere.

"You weren't going to run?" he asks.

"NO!"

He closes his eyes again and his whole body relaxes. When he opens them I can see his pain and anguish.

"I thought…" he stops. "This is me, Bella. All of me… and I'm all yours. What do I have to do to make you realize that? To make you see that I want you, any way I can get you. That I love you."

"I love you too, Edward, and to see you like this is…" I choke and my tears start afresh. "I thought I'd broken you."

"Broken? Me? Oh no, Bella. Just the opposite."

He reaches out and takes my hand.

"You're my lifeline," he whispers, and he kisses my knuckles before pressing my palm against his… and very gently, his eyes wide and full of fear, he tugs my hand and places it on his chest, over his heart – in the forbidden zone. His breathing quickens. I feel his heart beating a frantic pounding tattoo beneath my fingers, and the warmth of his skin beneath the thin fabric of his white linen shirt – oh my – but he doesn't take his eyes off mine… and I can see his tense jaw, his teeth clenched.

Oh, Fifty! I gasp. He's letting me touch him. Holy crow! And it's like all the air in my lungs has vaporized… gone. I hear the blood pounding in my ears as the rhythm of my heart rises to match his. He releases my hand, leaving it in place over his heart. I flex my fingers slightly. He's holding his breath. I can't bear it. I make to move my hand.

"No," he says quickly, and places his hand once more over mine, pressing my fingers against him. "Don't."

Emboldened by these two words I shuffle closer, so our knees are touching, and tentatively raise my other hand, so that he knows exactly what I intend to do. His eyes grow wider but he doesn't stop me. Gently I start to undo the buttons on his shirt. It's tricky with one hand. I flex my fingers beneath his hand and he lets go, allowing me to use both hands to undo his shirt. My eyes don't leave his as I pull his shirt apart, revealing his chest.

He swallows and his mouth parts slightly as his breathing increases, and I can sense his rising panic, but he doesn't pull away… because he's still in sub mode? I have no idea. Should I do this? *Oh no*. I don't want to hurt him, physically or mentally. The sight of him like this, offering himself to me, has been a wake-up call. I reach up, and my hand hovers over him, and I stare at him… asking his permission. Very slightly he tilts his head to one side in anticipation of my touch, steeling himself, and I can feel the tension radiating from him, but this time it's not in anger – it's in fear. I hesitate. Can I really do this to him?

"Yes," he breathes, again with the weird ability to answer my unspoken questions.

I extend my fingertips into his chest hair and lightly brush them down his sternum. He closes his eyes and his face creases, as if he's in intolerable pain. It's unbearable to witness, so I lift my fingers immediately, but he quickly grabs my hand and replaces it firmly, flat on his bare chest, so that the hair tickles my palm.

"No," he says, his voice strained. "I need to." His eyes are screwed up so tightly. This must be agony. It's truly tormenting to watch. Very carefully I let my fingers stroke across his chest to his heart, marveling at the feel of him, terrified that this is a step too far. He opens his eyes and they are green fire, blazing at me. Holy cow. His look is blistering, feral, beyond intense, and his breathing is rapid… and it stirs my blood. I squirm under his gaze. He hasn't stopped me, so I run my fingertips across his chest again, and his mouth falls open slackly. He's panting, and I don't know if it's from fear, or something else. I've wanted to kiss him there for so long that I lean up on my knees, and hold his gaze for a moment, making my intention perfectly clear. Then I bend and gently plant a soft kiss above his heart, feeling his warm sweet-smelling naked skin beneath my lips. His strangled groan moves me so much that I sit back on my heels, fearful of what I'll see on his face. His eyes are screwed tightly shut, but he hasn't moved.

"Again," he whispers, and I bend, this time to kiss one of his scars. He gasps, and I kiss another, and another. He groans loudly, and suddenly his arms are around me, and his hand is in my hair, pulling my head up painfully so that my lips meet his insistent mouth, and we're kissing, my fingers knotting into his hair.

"Oh, Bella," he breathes and he twists and pulls me down on to the floor so that I am underneath him. I bring my hands up to cup his beautiful face… and in that moment, I can feel his tears. He's crying… no. No!

"Edward, please don't cry. I meant it when I said I'd never leave you. I did. If I gave you any other impression, I'm so sorry… please, please forgive me. I love you. I will always love you."

He looms over me, gazing down into my face, and his expression is so pained.

"What is it?"

His eyes grow larger.

"What is this secret that makes you think I'll run for the hills? That makes you so determined to believe I'll go?" I demand. "Tell me, please!" He sits up again, though this time he crosses his legs, and I sit up with my legs outstretched.*Jeez, can't we get off the floor?* But I don't want to interrupt his train of thought. He's finally going to confide in me!

He gazes down at me, and he looks utterly desolate. *Oh shit – it's bad.*

"Bella. I've only ever lied to you once, but I lie to myself constantly."

Oh? Where the hell is this going? *It sounds really bad.*

He takes a deep breath and swallows.

"I'm a sadist, Bella. I like to whip little brown-haired girls like you because you all look like the crack whore - my birth mother. I'm sure you can guess why." He says it in a rush, like he's had the sentence in his head for days and days, and is desperate to be rid of it.

Oh no. It's not what I expected, but it does explain why we all look the same. My immediate thought is that Lauren was right – *Master is dark.* I recall the first conversation we had about his tendencies, we were in the red room of pain.

"You said you weren't a sadist," I whisper. I am definitely not as shocked as I think I ought to be.

"I know. Like I said, I lied to you. And I lie to myself about it. I'm sorry." He looks briefly down at his manicured fingernails – and I would say he's mortified.

Mortified about lying to me? Or about what he is?

"When you asked me that question, I had envisioned a very different relationship between us," he murmurs. I can tell by his gaze that he's terrified.

Then it hits me like a demolition ball. If he's a sadist, he really *needs* all that whipping shit. *Oh fuck.* I put my head in my hands.

"So it's true," I whisper. "I can't give you what you need." I glance up at him briefly. This is it – this really does mean we are incompatible. The world starts falling away at my feet, and collapsing around me as panic grips my throat. My subconscious is wearing her Edvard Munch face.

He frowns.

"No, that's not what I meant." He blinks at me, like I'm a freak of nature or something. "You're still here. I thought you would be out of the door by now."

"Why? Because I might think you're a sicko, for whipping and fucking women who look like your mother? Whatever would give you that impression?" I hiss at him, angry.

He blanches at my harsh words.

"Well, I wouldn't have put it quite like that, but yes."

I frown, and I feel the bile rise in my throat as I recall the photograph in his childhood bedroom, and I realize in that moment why the woman in it looked so familiar. She looked like him. She must have been his biological mother. His easy dismissal of her comes to mind.

No one of consequence.

"After I hit you with the belt, and you left me, my world-view changed, Isabella. I wasn't joking when I said I would avoid ever feeling like that again. When you said you loved me, it was a revelation. No one's ever said it to me before, and it was like I'd laid something to rest – or maybe you laid it to rest, I don't know. Dr. Banner and I are still in deep discussion about it."

Oh…

"What does that all mean?"

"I don't need it. Not now."

What?

"How do you know? How can you be so sure?"

"I just know. The thought of hurting you… in any real way… it's abhorrent to me."

"I don't understand. What about rulers and spanking and all that kinky fuckery?"

He shakes his head and smiles slightly, then sighs ruefully.

"I'm talking about the heavy stuff, Isabella. You should see what I can do with a cane, or a cat."

My mouth drops open stunned.

"I'd rather not."

"I know. And now, I don't feel that compulsion at all. It's gone."

"When we met, that's what you wanted, though."

"Yes, undoubtedly."

"How can it just go, Edward? Like I'm some kind of panacea, and you're – for want of a better word – cured? I don't get it."

Another sigh.

"I wouldn't say 'cured'… You don't believe me?"

"I just find it – unbelievable. Which is different."

"If you'd never left me, then I probably wouldn't feel this way. You walking out on me was the best thing you ever did – for us. It made me realize how much I want you, just you, and I meant it when I said - I'll take you any way I can have you."

He seems sincere, but now I'm really confused. He'd reassured me about Lauren, but now I know, with more certainty than ever, how she was able to give him his kicks. The thought is wearying and unpalatable. I am so tired of all this.

"Edward, I'm exhausted. Can we discuss this in bed?"

He blinks at me in surprise.

"You're not going?"

"Oh, for crying out loud – NO! Unless you want me to go."

"No. Never."

"What can I do to make you understand I will not run? What can I say?"

He gazes at me, revealing his fear and anguish again.

He swallows.

"There is one thing you can do."

"What?" I snap.

"Marry me," he whispers.

WHAT? Holy fuck.

Chapter 77

I gaze at the deeply fucked-up man I love. I can't believe what he's just said. *Marriage?* He's proposing marriage? Is he kidding? I can't help it – a small nervous, disbelieving giggle erupts from deep inside. I bite my lip to stop it from turning into full-scale hysterical laughter, and fail miserably. I lie back flat on the floor and surrender myself to the laughter, laughing like I've never laughed before, huge healing cathartic howls of laughter. And for a moment I am on my own, looking down at this absurd situation, a giggling overwhelmed girl, beside a beautiful damaged boy. I drape my arm across my eyes, as my laughter turns to scalding tears. *No, no… this is too much*. As the hysteria subsides, Edward gently lifts my arm off my face. I turn and gaze up at him.

He's leaning over me, his mouth twisted with wry amusement, but his eyes a burning green, maybe wounded. *Oh no.*

"You find my proposal amusing, Miss Swan?" He gently wipes away a stray tear with the back of his knuckles. Reaching up, I caress his cheek tenderly, enjoying the feel of the stubble beneath my fingers. *Lord I love this man.*

"Oh, Mr. Cullen… Edward. Your sense of timing is without doubt..." I gaze up at him, as words fail me. He smirks at me, but the crinkling around his eyes shows me that he's hurt. It's sobering.

"You're cutting me to the quick here, Bella. Will you marry me?"

I sit up and lean over him placing my hands on his knees. I stare into his lovely face.

"Edward, I've met your mad ex with a gun, been thrown out of my apartment, had you go thermo-nuclear Fifty on me…"

He opens his mouth to speak but I hold up my hand, requesting his silence. He obediently shuts his mouth.

"You've just revealed some, quite frankly, shocking information about yourself, and now you've asked me to marry you."

He moves his head from side to side as if considering the facts. He's amused, thank heavens.

"Yes, I think that's a fair and accurate summary of the situation," he says dryly.

I shake my head at him.

"Whatever happened to delayed gratification?"

"I got over it, and I'm now a firm advocate of instant gratification. *Carpe diem,* Bella," he whispers.

"Look Edward, I've known you for about 3 minutes, and there's so much more I need to know. I've had too much to drink, I'm hungry, I'm tired, and I want to go to bed. I need to consider your proposal, like I considered that contract you gave me. And…" I press my lips together to show my displeasure. "That wasn't the most romantic proposal."

He tilts his head to one side and his lips quirk up in a smile.

"Fair point, well made, as ever, Miss Swan," he breathes and I can hear his relief. "So that's not a no?"

I sigh.

"No, Mr. Cullen, it's not a no, but it's not a yes either. You're only doing this because you're scared and you don't trust me," I whisper.

"No, I'm doing this because I've finally met someone I want to spend the rest of my life with."

Oh… I gasp. My heart skips a beat and inside I melt. How is it he can say the most romantic things sometimes? I gape at him as my mouth pops open in shock.

"I never thought that would happen to me," he continues, his expression radiating undiluted, dazzling sincerity.

"Can I think about it… please? And think about everything else that's happened today? You asked for patience and faith… well, back at you, Cullen. I need those now."

His eyes search mine and after a beat he leans forward and tucks my hair behind my ear.

"I can live with that." He kisses me quickly on the lips. "Not very romantic, eh?" He raises his eyebrows darkly and I give him an admonishing shake of my head.

"Hearts and flowers?" he asks softly.

I nod and he grins.

"You're hungry?"

"Yes."

"You didn't eat." His eyes frost and his jaw hardens.

"No, I didn't eat." I sit back on my heels and regard him passively. "Being thrown out of my apartment, after witnessing my boyfriend interacting intimately with his ex-submissive… suppressed my appetite considerably." I can't help but glare and my hands fist on my hips.

Edward shakes his head and rises gracefully to his feet. Oh, finally we can get off the floor. He holds his hand out to me.

"Let me fix you something to eat," he says.

"Can't I just go to bed?" I mutter wearily as I place my hand in his. He pulls me up. I am stiff. He gazes down at me, his expression soft.

"No, you need to eat. Come."

Bossy Edward is back. Oh, it's such a relief. He leads me to the kitchen area and ushers me towards a bar stool as he heads to the fridge. I glance at my watch. Jeez, nearly eleven thirty and I have to get up for work in the morning.

"Edward, I'm really not hungry."

He studiously ignores me as he ferrets through the enormous fridge.

"Cheese?" he asks.

"Not at this hour."

"Pretzels?"

"In the fridge? No," I snap.

He turns and grins at me.

"You don't like pretzels?"

"Not at eleven thirty. Edward, I'm going to bed. You can rummage around in your refrigerator for the rest of the night if you want. I'm tired, and I've had a far too interesting a day. A day I'd like I'd to forget."

I slide off the stool and he scowls at me, but right now I don't care. I want to go to bed – I'm exhausted.

"Macaroni and cheese?" He holds up a white bowl lidded with foil. He looks so hopeful and endearing.

"You like macaroni and cheese?" I ask.

He nods enthusiastically, and my heart just melts. He looks so young all of a sudden. Who would have thought? Edward Cullen likes nursery food.

"You want some?" he asks, like he's asking about something else – something much yummier than macaroni and cheese. I can't resist him, and actually I am hungry.

I grin and his answering grin is breathtaking. He takes the foil off the bowl and pops it into the microwave. I perch back on the school and watch the beauty that is Mr. Edward Cullen – the man who wants to marry me – move gracefully and with ease around his kitchen.

"So you know how to use the microwave then?" I tease softly.

"If it's in a packet I can usually do something with it. It's real food I have a problem with."

I cannot believe this is the same man who was on his knees in front of me not half an hour before. He's his usual mercurial self. He sets out plates, cutlery, and tablemats on the breakfast bar.

"It's very late," I mutter.

"Don't go to work tomorrow."

"I have to go to work tomorrow. My boss is leaving for New York."

Edward frowns.

"Do you want to go there this weekend?"

I shake my head.

"I checked the weather forecast and it looks like rain."

"Oh, so what do you want to do?"

The microwave's ping announces that our supper is warmed through.

"I just want to get through one day at a time at the moment. All this excitement is… tiring." I raise an eyebrow at him, which he judiciously ignores.

Edward places the white bowl in between our place settings and takes his seat beside me. He looks deep in thought, distracted suddenly. I dish the macaroni onto our plates. It smells divine, and my mouth fills with saliva in anticipation. I am famished.

"Sorry about Lauren," he murmurs.

"Why are you sorry?" Hmm, the macaroni tastes as goods as it smells. My stomach grumbles gratefully.

"It must have been a terrible shock for you, finding her in your apartment. Taylor swept it earlier himself. He's very upset."

"Oh."

"And he's been out looking for you."

"Really? Why?"

"I didn't know where you were. You left your purse, your phone. I couldn't even track you. Where did you go?" he asks softly, but there's an ominous undercurrent to his words.

"Jasper and I just went to a bar across the street. So I could watch what was happening."

"I see."

The atmosphere between us has changed subtly… it's no longer light. Okay, well… two can play that game. Let's just bring this back to you, Fifty. Trying to sound nonchalant, wanting to assuage my burning curiosity but dreading the answer, I ask softly, "So what did you do with Lauren in the apartment?" I glance quickly up at him as he's about to put a forkful of macaroni in his mouth.

He freezes. *Oh no, that's not good.*

"You really want to know?"

A knot tightens in my gut and my appetite vanishes.

"Yes," I whisper. *Do you? Do you really?* My subconscious has thrown her empty bottle of gin on the floor and is sitting up in her armchair, glaring at me in horror.

Edward's mouth flattens into a line and he hesitates.

"We talked, and I gave her a bath." His voice is hoarse and he continues quickly when I make no response. "And I dressed her in some of your clothes. I hope you don't mind. But she was filthy."

Holy fuck.

He bathed her? What an inappropriate thing to do. I am reeling, staring down at my uneaten macaroni. The sight of it now makes me nauseous. *Try to rationalize this*, my subconscious coaches, and that intellectual cool part of my brain knows that he just did that because she was dirty, but it's too hard. My fragile jealous self can't bear it. Suddenly I want to cry – not succumb to ladylike tears that trickle decorously down my cheeks, but howling at the moon crying. I take a deep breath to suppress the urge, but my throat is arid and uncomfortable from my unshed tears and sobs.

"It was all I could do, Bella," he says softly.

"You still have feelings for her?"

"No!" he says, appalled, and closes his eyes, his expression one of anguish. I can't bear to look at him.

"To see her like that – so different, so broken. I care about her, one human being to another." He shrugs as if to shake off an unpleasant memory. *Jeez, is he expecting my sympathy?* "Bella, look at me."

I can't. I know that if I do, I will burst into tears. This is just too much to absorb. I feel like an overflowing tank of gasoline – full, beyond capacity. There is no room for any more. I simply cannot cope with any further crap. I will combust and explode and it will be ugly. Jeez! Edward with his ex-sub, caring for her and in such an intimate fashion. Bathing her, for fuck's sake… naked. A harsh, painful shudder wracks my body.

"Bella."

"What?"

"Don't. It doesn't mean anything. It was like caring for a child, a broken shattered child," he mutters.

What the hell would he know about caring for a child? This was a woman he had a very full on deviant-sexual relationship with. *Oh, this hurts*. I take a deep, steadying breath. Or perhaps he's referring to himself, he's the broken child. Oh, this is so fucked up. I need to sleep.

"Bella?"

I stand, take my plate to the sink and scrape the contents into the trash.

"Bella, please."

I whirl around and face him.

"Just stop, Edward! Just stop with the 'Bella' please!" I shout at him, and I can feel tears start to trickle down my face. "I've had enough of all this shit today. I am going to bed. I am tired and emotional. Now let me be."

I turn on my heel and practically run to the bedroom, taking with me the memory of his wide-eyed, shocked stare. Nice to know I can shock him too. I strip out of my clothes in double-quick time, and riffling through his chest of drawers, drag on one of his t-shirts and head for the bathroom. I gaze at myself in the mirror, hardly recognizing the gaunt, pink-eyed, blotchy-cheeked harridan staring back at me, and it's too much. I sink to the floor and surrender to the overwhelming emotion I can no longer contain, sobbing huge chest-wrenching sobs, finally letting my tears flow unrestrained.

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"Hey..." Edward's voice is soft as he pulls me into his arms. "Please don't cry, Bella… please," he begs. He's on the bathroom floor and I am in his lap. I put my arms around him and weep into his neck. He gently strokes my back, my head, cooing softly into my hair.

"I'm sorry, baby," he breathes, and that makes me cry harder, and hug him tighter.

And we sit like this for an age. Eventually Edward staggers to his feet, holding me, and carries me into his room, where he lays me down in the bed. In a few moments he's beside me and the lights are off. He pulls me into his arms, hugging me tightly, and eventually I drift off into a dark and troubled sleep.

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I awake with a jolt. My head is fuzzy and I am too warm. Edward is wrapped around me. He grumbles in his sleep as I slip out of his arms, but he doesn't wake. I sit up and glance at the radio alarm… three in the morning. I need an Advil, and a drink. I swing my legs out of bed and make my way up the hallway towards the great room.

In the fridge I find a carton of orange juice and pour myself a long glass. Hmm… it's delicious, and my fuzzy head eases immediately.

I hunt through the cupboards looking for some painkillers and eventually come across a plastic box full of meds. I sink two Advil and pour myself another glass of orange juice. Wandering to the great wall of glass, I look out on a sleeping Seattle. The lights twinkle

and wink beneath Edward's castle in the sky, or should I say fortress? I press my forehead against the cool glass – it's a relief. I have so much to think about after all the revelations of yesterday. I place my back against the glass and slide down onto the floor. The great room is so cavernous in the dark, the only light coming from the three lamps above the kitchen island. Could I live here, married to Edward? After all that he's done here? All the history this place holds for him? Marriage… it's almost unbelievable, and so unexpected. But then everything about Edward is unexpected. My lips quirk up. Edward Cullen, expect the unexpected. Fifty Shades of Fucked Up. My smile fades. I look like his mother. That wounds me, deeply, and the air leaves my lungs in a rush. *We all look like his mom.* How the hell do I move on from the disclosure of that little secret? No wonder he didn't want to tell me. But surely he can't remember much of his mother. I wonder, for the first time, if I should talk to Dr. Banner. Would Edward let me? Perhaps he could fill in the gaps.

I shake my head. I am so tired, but I'm enjoying the calm serenity of the great room and its beautiful works of art – cold, in their own way, but still beautiful in the shadows – and surely worth a fortune. Could I live here? For better, for worse? In sickness and in health? I close my eyes, lean my head back against the glass, and take a deep, cleansing breath.

The peaceful tranquility is shattered by a feral, visceral, primeval cry that makes every single hair on my body stand to attention. *Edward! Holy fuck – what's happened?* I am on my feet and running, running back to the bedroom before the echoes of that horrible sound have died away, my heart thumping with fear.

I flip one of the light switches and Edward's bedside light comes to life. He's tossing and turning, writhing in agony. *No!* He cries out again, and the eerie, devastating sound lances through me anew.

Shit – a nightmare!

"Edward!" I lean over him and grabbing his shoulders shake him awake. He opens his eyes, and they are wild, staring and crazy, scanning quickly round the empty room before coming back to rest on me.

"You left, you left, you must have left," he gabbles quickly – his wide-eyed stare becoming accusatory – and he looks so lost, it wrenches at my heart. *Poor Fifty.*

"I'm here." I sit down on the bed beside him. "I'm here," I murmur softly, in an effort to reassure him. I reach out to place my palm on the side of his face, trying to bring him solace.

"You must have gone," he whispers rapidly. His eyes are still wild and frightened, but he seems to be calming.

"I went to get a drink. I was thirsty."

He closes his eyes and runs his hand through his hair. When he opens them again he looks so desolate.

"You're here. Oh thank God." He reaches for me, and grabbing me tightly pulls down on the bed beside him.

"I just went for a drink," I murmur. Oh, the intensity of his fear… I can feel it. His t-shirt is drenched in sweat and his heartbeat is pounding as he hugs me close. He's gazing at me as if reassuring himself that I am really here. I gently stroke his hair and then his cheek. "Edward, please. I'm here. I'm not going anywhere," I say soothingly.

"Oh, Bella," he breathes. He grasps my chin to hold me in place, and then his mouth is on mine. I feel desire sweep through him, and unconsciously and unbidden my body responds – it's so tied and attuned to him. His lips are at my ear, my throat and then back at my lips, his teeth gently pulling at my lower lip, his hand traveling up my body from my hip up to my breast, dragging my t-shirt up. Caressing me, feeling his way through the dips and shallows of my skin, eliciting the same familiar reaction, his touch sending shivers through me. I moan as his hand cups my breast and his fingers tighten over my nipple.

"I want you," he breathes.

"I'm here, for you. Only you, Edward."

He groans and kisses me once more, passionately, with a fervor and desperation I've not felt from him before. Grabbing the hem of his t-shirt, I tug, and he helps me pull it off over his head. Kneeling between my legs he hastily pulls me upright and drags my t-shirt off. His eyes are serious, wanting, full of dark secrets – exposed. *Oh no.* He folds his hands around my face and kisses me, and we sink down into the bed once more, his thigh between both of mine, half lying on top of me. I can feel him through his boxers, feel his rigid desire against my hip. He wants me, but his words from earlier choose this moment to come back and haunt me, what he said about his mother. And it's like a bucket of cold water on my libido. *Fuck.* I can't do this. Not now.

"Edward… Stop. I can't do this," I whisper urgently against his mouth, my hands pushing on his upper arms.

"What? What's wrong?" he murmurs and starts kissing my neck, running the tip of his tongue along the line of my carotid artery. *Oh…*

"No, please. I can't do this, not now. I need some time, please."

"Oh, Bella, don't over think this," he breathes, as he nips my earlobe.

Ah! I gasp, feeling it in my groin, and my body bows, betraying me. This is so confusing.

"I am just the same, Bella. I love you and I need you. Touch me. Please." He rubs his nose against mine, and I hear his quiet heartfelt plea, and I melt. Touch him, touch him while making love. Oh my. He rears up over me, and gazes down at me, and in the half-light from the dimmed bedside light I can tell that he's waiting… waiting for my decision, and his look is one of a man caught in my spell. I reach up and very tentatively place my hand on the soft patch of hair over his sternum. He gasps and scrunches his eyes closed as if in pain, but I don't take my hand away this time. I move it up to his shoulders, and I can feel the tremor run through him. He groans, and I pull him down to me, and place both my hands on his back, where I've never touched him before, on his shoulder blades, holding him to me. His strangled moan arouses me like nothing else. He buries his head in my neck, kissing and sucking and biting me, before trailing his nose up my chin and kissing me, his tongue possessing my mouth, his hands moving over my body once more. His lips move down… down… down to my breasts, worshipping as they go, and my hands stay on his shoulders and his back, enjoying the flex and ripple of his finely-honed muscles, his skin still damp from his nightmare. His lips close over my nipple, pulling and tugging, so that it elongates, rising to greet his glorious skilled mouth.

I groan and I run my fingernails across his back. And he gasps, a strangled cry.

"Oh fuck, Bella," he breathes and it's half cry, half choked groan, and it tears at my heart, but also deep inside me, tightening all the muscles below my waist. Oh, what I can do to him! My inner goddess is writhing with want and I'm panting now, matching his tortured breaths with my own. His hand travels south, over my belly, down to my sex and his fingers are on me, then in me. I groan as he moves his fingers round, inside me, in that way, and I push my pelvis up to welcome his touch.

"Oh, Bella," he breathes. Suddenly he releases me and sits up, removing his boxers, and leaning over to the bedside table grabs a foil packet. His eyes a blazing green, he passes me the condom.

"You want to do this? You can still say no. You can always say no," he murmurs.

"Don't give me a chance to think, Edward. I want you too." I rip the packet open with my teeth as he kneels between my legs and very slowly I slide it on to him.

"Steady," he breathes, "You are going to unman me, Bella." I marvel at what I can do to this man with my touch. He stretches out over me, and for now my doubts are pushed down and locked away in the dark scary depths at the back of my mind. I am intoxicated with this man, my man, my Fifty Shades. He shifts suddenly, completely taking me by surprise, so I am on top. Whoa.

"You – take me," he murmurs, his eyes glowing the brightest green.

Oh my, and slowly, oh so slowly, I sink down on to him. He tilts his head back and closes his eyes as he groans. I grab his hands and start to move, reveling in the fullness of my possession, reveling in his reaction, watching him unravel beneath me. I feel like a goddess. I lean down and kiss his chin, running my teeth along his stubbled jaw. He tastes delicious. He clasps my hips and steadies my rhythm, slow and easy.

"Bella, touch me… please."

Oh. I lean forward and steady myself with my hands on his chest. And he calls out, his cry almost a sob, and he thrusts deep inside me.

Ahh, I whimper and run my finger nails gently over his chest, through the sparse hair there, and he groans loudly and twists abruptly so I am once more beneath him.

"Enough," he breathes, "No more, please." And it's a heartfelt plea. Reaching up I clasp his face in my hands, feeling the dampness on his cheeks, and pull him down to my lips so that I can kiss him. I curl my hands around his back.

He groans deep and low in his throat as he moves inside me, pushing me onwards and upwards, but I can't find my release. My head is too cloudy, cloudy with issues, I am too wrapped up in him.

"Let go, Bella," he urges me.

"No."

"Yes," he snarls. He shifts slightly and gyrates his hips, again and again…

Jeez… argh!

"Yes, baby, come for me. Please."

And I explode, my body a slave to his, and wrap myself around him, clinging to him like a limpet as he cries out my name, and climaxes above me, then collapses on me, his full weight pressing me into the mattress.

-

I cradle Edward in my arms, his head on my chest, as we lie in the afterglow of our lovemaking. I run my fingers through his hair as I listen to his breathing return to normal.

"Don't ever leave me," he whispers, and I roll my eyes, in the full knowledge that he can't see me.

"I know you're rolling your eyes at me," he murmurs and I can hear the smallest hint of amusement in his voice.

"You know me well," I murmur.

"I'd like to know you better."

"Back at you, Cullen. What was your nightmare about?"

"Oh. The usual."

"Tell me."

He swallows and I can feel him tense before he sighs a long drawn out sigh.

"I must be about three, and the crack-whore's pimp is mad as hell again. He smokes and smokes, one cigarette after another, and he can't find an ashtray." He stops, and I freeze as a creeping chill grips my heart.

"It hurt," he says, "It's the pain I remember. That's what gives me nightmares. That, and the fact that she did nothing to stop him."

Oh fuck, he sounds so sad. I tighten my grip around him, my legs and arms holding him to me, trying not to let my despair choke me. How can anyone treat a child like that? He raises his head and pins me with his intense green gaze.

"You're not like her. Don't ever think that. Please."

I blink back at him. It's very reassuring to hear. He puts his head on my chest again, and I risk another question.

"Is that why you don't like to be touched?"

He closes his eyes and hugs me tighter.

"That's complicated," he murmurs.

"I'm a big girl. I'm sure I can keep up."

He nuzzles me between my breasts, inhaling deeply, trying to distract me.

"Tell me," I prompt.

He sighs.

"She didn't love me. I didn't love me. The only touch I knew was… harsh. It stemmed from there. Banner explains it better than I can."

"Can I see Banner?"

He raises his head to look at me.

"Fifty Shades rubbing off on you?"

"And some. I like how it's rubbing off at the moment." I wriggle provocatively underneath him and he grins.

"Yes Miss Swan, I like that too." He leans up and kisses me. He gazes at me for a moment. "You are so precious to me, Bella. I was serious about marrying you. We can get to know each other then. I can look after you. You can look after me. We can have kids if you want. I will lay my world at your feet, Isabella. I want you, body and soul, forever. Please think about it."

"I will think about it, Edward. I will," I reassure him, reeling once more. Kids? Jeez. "I'd really like to talk to Dr. Banner though, if you don't mind."

"Anything for you, baby. Anything. When would you like to see him?"

"Well, sooner rather than later."

"Okay. I'll make the arrangements in the morning." He glances at the clock. "It's late. We should sleep." He shifts to switch off his bedside light and pulls me against him. I glance the radio alarm. Jeez, it's 3:45. He curls his arms around me, his front to my back, and nuzzles my neck.

"I love you, Bella Swan, and I want you by my side always," he murmurs as he kisses my neck. "Now go to sleep."

I close my eyes.

Chapter 78

Reluctantly I open my heavy eyelids and bright light fills the room. I groan. I feel fuzzy, disconnected from my leaden limbs, and Edward is wrapped around me like ivy. I'm too warm, as per usual. Surely it's just 5 in the morning. The alarm has not gone off yet. I stretch out to free myself from his heat, turning in his arms, and he mumbles something unintelligible in his sleep. I glance at the clock. 8:45.

Shit, I'm going to be late. Fuck. I scramble out of bed and dash to the bathroom. I am showered and out within four minutes.

Edward sits up in bed watching me with ill-concealed amusement coupled with wariness as I continue to dry myself while gathering my clothes. Perhaps he's waiting for me to react to yesterday's revelations – right now I just don't have time. I check my clothes – black slacks, black shirt… all a bit Mrs. R, but I don't have a second to change my mind. I hastily don black bra and panties, conscious that he's watching my every move. It's… unnerving. The panties and bra will do.

"You look good," Edward purrs from the bed. "You can call in sick, you know." He gives me his devastating lopsided one hundred and fifty percent panty-busting smile. Oh, he's so tempting. My inner goddess pouts provocatively at me.

"No, Edward I can't. I am not a meglomaniac CEO with a beautiful smile who can come and go as he pleases."

"I like to come as I please." He smirks and cranks his glorious crooked smile up another notch so it's in full HD IMAX.

"Edward!" I scold. I throw my towel at him and he laughs.

"Beautiful smile, huh?"

"Yes. You know the effect you have on me." I put on my watch.

"Do I?" he blinks innocently.

"Yes, you do. The same effect you have on all women. Gets really tiresome watching them all swoon."

"Does it?" He cocks his eyebrow at me, more amused.

"Don't play the innocent, Mr. Cullen, it really doesn't suit you," I mutter distractedly as I scoop my hair into a ponytail and pull on my black high-heeled shoes. There, that will do.

When I bend to kiss him goodbye he grabs me and pulls me down onto the bed, leaning over me, smiling from ear to ear. Oh my. He's so beautiful: eyes bright with mischief, floppy just-fucked-again hair, that dazzling smile. *Now* he's playful. I'm tired, still reeling from all the disclosures of yesterday, while he's bright as a button and sexy as fuck. Oh, exasperating Fifty.

"What can I do to tempt you to stay?" he says softly, and my heart skips a beat and begins to pound. He is temptation personified.

"You can't," I grumble, struggling to sit back up. "Let me go."

He pouts, and I give up, grinning, tracing my fingers over his sculptured lips – my Fifty Shades. I love him so, in all his monumental fuckedupness. I haven't even begun to process yesterday's events and how I feel about them. I lean up to kiss him, thankful that I have brushed my teeth. He kisses me long and hard and then swiftly sets me on my feet, leaving me dazed, breathless, and slightly wobbly.

"Taylor will take you. Quicker than finding somewhere to park. He's waiting outside the building," Edward says kindly, and he seems relieved. Is he worried about my reaction this morning? Surely last night – err, this morning – proved that I am not going to run.

"Okay. Thank you," I mutter, disappointed that I am upright on my feet, confused by his hesitancy, and vaguely irritated that once again I won't be driving my Saab. But he's right, of course – it will be quicker with Taylor. "Well, enjoy your lie-in Mr. Cullen. I wish I could stay, but the man who owns the company I work for would not approve of his staff ditching just for hot sex." I grin and grab my purse.

"Personally, Miss Swan, I have no doubt that he would approve. In fact he might insist on it."

"Why are you staying in bed? It's not like you."

He fold his hands behind his head and grins at me.

"Because I can, Miss Swan."

I shake my head at him.

"Laters, baby." I blow him a kiss and I am out of the door.

-

Taylor is waiting for me, and he seems to understand that I am late, because he drives like a bat out of hell to get me to work by 9:15. I am grateful when he pulls up at the curb –

grateful to be alive. Jeez, his driving was scary. And grateful that I am not hideously late – only fifteen minutes.

"Thank you, Taylor," I mutter, ashen-faced. I remember Edward telling me he drove tanks, maybe he drives Nascars too.

"Bella." He nods a farewell and I dash into my office, realizing as I open the door to reception that Taylor seems to have overcome the Miss Swan formality. It makes me smile.

Claire grins at me as I rush through reception and make my way to my desk.

"Bella!" James calls me. "Get in here."

Oh shit.

"What time do you call this?" he snaps.

"I'm sorry. I overslept." I flush crimson.

"Don't let it happen again. Fix me some coffee. Then I need you to do some letters. Jump to it," he shouts, making me flinch. Why's he so mad? What's his problem? I hurry to the kitchen to fix his coffee. Maybe I should have ditched. I could be… well, doing something hot with Edward, or having breakfast with him, or just talking – that would be novel.

James barely acknowledges my presence when I venture back into his office to deliver his coffee. He thrusts a sheet of paper at me – it's handwritten, in a barely legible scrawl. "Type this up, have me sign, then copy and mail it to all our authors."

"Yes, James."

He doesn't look up as I leave. Boy, is he mad.

It is with some relief that I finally sit down at my desk. I take a sip of tea as I wait for my computer to boot up.

I check my emails.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 17 June 2009 09.05
To: Isabella Swan

Please use your BlackBerry.

x

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: All Right for Some
Date: 17 June 2009: 09.33
To: Edward Cullen

My boss is mad.
I blame you keeping me up late with your… shenanigans.
You should be ashamed of yourself.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Shenaniwhatagans?
Date: 17 June 2009 09.40
To: Isabella Swan

You don't have to work, Isabella.
You have no idea how appalled I am at my shenanigans.
But I like keeping you up late ;)

Please use your BlackBerry. Oh, and marry me.

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Living to make
Date: 17 June 2009: 09.44
To: Edward Cullen

I know your natural inclination is towards nagging, but just stop.
I need to talk to your shrink.
Only then will I give you my answer.
I am not opposed to living in sin.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: BLACKBERRY
Date: 17 June 2009 09.48
To: Isabella Swan

Isabella, if you are going to start discussing Dr. Banner, then USE YOUR BLACKBERRY. This is not a request.

Edward Cullen,
Now Pissed CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

Oh shit. Now *he's* mad at me, too. Well, he can stew for all I care. I take my BlackBerry out of my purse and eye it with skepticism. As I do, it starts ringing. Oh jeez, can't he leave me alone?

"Yes," I snap.

"Bells, hi…"

Jake?

"Jake! How are you?" Jeez, it's good to hear his voice.

"I'm fine Bella. Look, are you still seeing that Cullen guy?"

Oh, shit. Where is he going with this?

"Err – yes… Why?"

"Well, he's bought all your photos, and I thought I could deliver them up to Seattle Friday. The exhibition closes Thursday, so I could bring them up Friday evening and drop them

off, you know. And maybe we could catch a drink or something. Actually, I was hoping for a place to crash too."

"Oh, Jake, that's cool. Yeah, I'm sure we could work something out. Let me talk to Edward and call you back, okay?"

"Cool, I'll wait to hear from you. Bye, Bells."

"Bye." And he's gone.

Holy crow. I haven't seen or heard from Jake since his show. I didn't even ask him how it went, or if he sold any more pictures. Some friend I am. So, I could spend the evening with Jake on Friday. How will Edward like that? I become aware that I am biting my lip till it hurts. Oh, that man has double standards. He can – I shudder at the thought – bathe his batshit ex-lover, but I will probably get a truckload of grief for wanting to have a drink with Jake. How am I going to handle this?

"Bella!" James pulls me abruptly out of my reverie. Is he still mad? "Where's that letter?"

"Err – coming." Shit. What is eating him?

I type up his letter in double quick time, print it out, and nervously make my way into his office.

"Here you go." I place it on his desk and turn to leave. James quickly casts his critical piercing blue eyes over it.

"I don't know what you're doing out there, but I pay you to work, Bella," he barks.

"I'm aware of that, James," I mutter apologetically. I feel a slow flush creep up my skin.

"This is full of mistakes," he snaps. "Do it again."

Fuck. He's beginning to sound like someone I know, but rudeness from Edward I can tolerate. James is beginning to piss me off.

"And get me another coffee while you're at it."

"Sorry," I whisper and scurry out of his office as quickly as I can.

Holy fuck. He's getting unbearable.

I sit back down at my desk, hastily redo his letter, and check it thoroughly before printing. Now it's perfect. I fetch him another coffee, letting Claire know with a roll of my eyes that I am in deep doo-doo. Taking a deep breath, I broach his office again.

"Better," he mumbles reluctantly, but he signs the letter. "Photocopy it, file the original, mail out to all authors. Understand?"

"Yes." I am not an idiot. "James, is there something wrong?"

He glances up, his blue eyes darkening as his gaze runs up and down me. My blood chills.

"No."

His answer is concise, rude, and dismissive. I stand there like the idiot I professed not to be, then shuffle back out of his office. Perhaps he too suffers from a personality disorder. Sheesh, I'm surrounded by them. I make my way to the photocopier – which of course is suffering from a paper-jam – and when I've fixed it, I find it's out of paper. This is not my day.

When I am finally back at my desk, stuffing envelopes, my BlackBerry buzzes. I can see through the glass wall that James is on the phone. I answer – it's Jasper.

"Hi, Bella. How'd it go last night?"

Last night… and a quick montage of images flashes through my mind, Edward kneeling, macaroni and cheese, the weeping, the nightmare… the sex. Me touching him.

"Eh… fine," I mutter unconvincingly.

Jasper pauses, and decides to collude in my denial.

"Cool. Can I collect the keys?"

"Sure."

"I'll be over in about half an hour. Will you have time to grab a coffee?"

"Not today. I was late in and my boss is like an angry bear with a sore head and poison ivy up his ass."

"Sounds nasty."

"Nasty, and ugly," I giggle.

Jasper laughs and my mood lifts a little.

"Okay. See you in thirty, Bella."

He hangs up.

I glance up at James and he's staring at me. *Oh shit*. I studiously ignore him and continue to stuff envelopes.

Half an hour later my phone buzzes.

"He's here again, in reception. The blond god." It's Claire, and in her own sweet way she's telling me that Jasper has arrived.

Jasper is a joy to see after all the angst of yesterday and the spewing bad temper my boss is inflicting on me today, but all too soon he's saying his goodbyes.

"Will I see you this evening?"

"I'll probably stay with Edward." I flush.

"You have got it bad," Jasper observes good-naturedly.

I shrug – that's not the half of it, and in that moment I realize, I have it more than bad. I have it for life. And amazingly, Edward seems to feel the same. Oh my.

Jasper gives me a swift hug.

"Laters, Bella."

I return to my desk wrestling inwardly with my realization. Oh, what I would do for a day on my own, to just think all this through!

"Where have you been?"

James is suddenly looming over me.

"I had some business to attend to in reception." He is really getting on my nerves.

"Well, I want my lunch. The usual," he says abruptly, and stomps back into his office.

Why didn't I stay home with Edward? My inner goddess crosses her arms and purses her lips – she wants to know the answer to that one too. Picking up my purse and my BlackBerry, I head for the door. I check my messages.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 17 June 2009 09.06
To: Isabella Swan

My bed is too big without you.
Looks like I'll have to go to work after all.
Even meglomaniac CEOs need something to do…

x

Edward Cullen,
Twiddling his thumbs CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

And there's another from him, from earlier this morning.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Discretion
Date: 17 June 2009 09.50
To: Isabella Swan

Is the better part of valor.
Please use discretion… your work emails are monitored.
HOW MANY TIMES DO I HAVE TO TELL YOU THIS?
Yes. Shouty capitals as you say. USE YOUR BLACKBERRY.
Dr. Banner can see us tomorrow evening.

x

Edward Cullen,
Still pissed CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

And an even later one... Oh no.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Crickets
Date: 17 June 2009 12.15
To: Isabella Swan

I haven't heard from you.
Please tell me you are ok.
You know how I worry.
I will send Taylor to check!

x

Edward Cullen,
Over-Anxious CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I roll my eyes, and call him. I don't want him to worry.

"Edward Cullen's phone, Angela Weber speaking."

Oh. I am so disconcerted that it's not Edward who answers that it halts me in the street, and the young man behind me mutters angrily as he swerves to avoid bumping into me. I stand under the green awning of the deli.

"Hello? Can I help you?" Angela fills the void of awkward silence.

"Sorry… Err – I was hoping to speak to, Edward…"

"Mr. Cullen is in a meeting at the moment." She bristles with efficiency. "Can I take a message?"

"Can you tell him Bella called?"

"Bella? As in Isabella Swan?"

"Err… Yes." Her question confuses me.

"Hold one second please, Miss Swan. "

I listen attentively as she puts the phone down, but I can't tell what's going on.

A few seconds later Edward is on the line.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

I hear the quick release of his held breath. He's relieved.

"Edward, why shouldn't I be okay?" I whisper reassuringly.

"You're normally so quick at replying to my emails. I was worried," he says quietly, and then he's talking to someone in his office.

"No, Angela! Tell them to wait," he says sternly. Oh, I know that tone of voice.

I can't hear Angela's response.

"No. I said wait." His tone is glacial.

"Edward, you're obviously busy. I only called to let you know that I'm okay, just very busy today. James has been cracking the whip. Err – I mean…" I flush and fall silent. Edward says nothing for a moment.

"Cracking the whip, eh? Well, there was a time when I would have called him a lucky man." I can hear his dry humor. "Don't let him get on top of you, baby."

"Edward!" I scold him and I can hear his grin.

"Just watch him, that's all. Look, I'm glad you're okay. What time shall I collect you?"

"I'll email you."

"From your BlackBerry," he says sternly.

"Yes, Sir," I snap back.

"Laters, baby."

"Bye…"

He's still hanging on.

"Hang up," I scold, smiling.

He sighs heavily down the phone.

"I wish you'd never gone to work this morning."

"Me too. But I am busy. Hang up."

"You hang up," he breathes. Oh, playful Edward. I love playful Edward. Hmm… I love Edward, period.

"We've been here before."

"You're biting your lip."

Shit… he's right. *How does he know?* I gasp.

"You see, you think I don't know you, Isabella. But I know you better than you think," he murmurs seductively, in that way that makes me weak, and wet – oh my.

"Edward, I'll talk to you later. Right now, I really wish I hadn't left this morning, too."

I sense his face-splitting grin.

"I'll wait for your email, Miss Swan."

"Good day, Mr. Cullen."

Hanging up I lean against the cold hard glass of the deli store-window. Oh my, even down the phone he owns me. Shaking my head to clear it of all thoughts Cullen, I head into the deli, depressed by all thoughts James.

-

He is glowering when I get back.

"Is it okay if I take my lunch now?" I ask tentatively. He gazes up at me and his scowl deepens.

"If you must," he snaps. "Forty-five minutes. Make up the time you lost this morning."

"James, can I ask you something?"

"What?" he snaps.

"You seem… kind of out of sorts today. Have I done something to offend you?"

He blinks at me momentarily.

"I don't think I'm in the mood to list your misdemeanors right now. I'm busy."

He goes back to staring at his computer screen, effectively dismissing me.

Whoa… what have I done? I turn and leave his office, and for a moment I think I'm going to cry. Why has he taken such a sudden and intense dislike to me? A very unwelcome idea pops into my head, but I ignore it. I don't need his shit right now – I have enough of my own. I head out of the building to the nearby Starbucks, order a latte, and sit down in the window. Taking my iPod from my purse, I plug my headphones in. I choose a song haphazardly, and press repeat so it will play over and over again. I need music to think by.

Are we having the time of our lives?

Are we having the time of our lives?

Are we coming across clear?

Are we coming across fine?

Are we part of the plan here?

Are we having the time of our lives?

My mind drifts. Edward the sadist. Edward the submissive. Edward's touch issues. Edward's oedipal impulses. Edward bathing Lauren. I groan and close my eyes while that last image haunts me. Can I marry this man? It's so much to try and take on board. He's so complex and difficult, but deep down I know I don't want to leave him, in spite of all his issues. I could never leave him. I love him. It would be like cutting off my right arm. Right now, I have never felt so alive, so vital. I've encountered all manner of riotous, rampaging feelings and new experiences since I met him. It's never a dull moment with Fifty. Looking back on my life just two months ago, before Edward, it's like everything was in black and white, like Jake's pictures, and now my whole world is in rich, bright, saturated color. I am in a beam of dazzling light. Edward's dazzling light.

The days were shaping up,

Frosty and bright.

Perfect weather to fly.

I smile fondly as my thoughts drift to Icarus. I am still flying far too close to the sun, looking for perfect weather to fly. I smile fondly. Flying with Edward… who can resist a man who can fly?

So how can I give this up? It's like he's flipped a switch and lit me up from within. It's been an education, knowing Mr. Cullen. I have discovered so much about myself and about my body, my hard limits, my soft limits, my tolerance, my patience… how much I can love. And it strikes me like a thunderbolt – that's what he needs, what he's entitled to. That's what he never received from the crackwhore – unconditional love. Can I love him unconditionally?

I know he's damaged, but I don't think he's irredeemable. I sigh, recalling Taylor's words – *He's a good man Miss Swan.*I've seen so much evidence of his goodness – his charity work, his business ethics, his generosity – and yet he doesn't see it in himself. He doesn't feel deserving of any love. Given his history, I now understand his self-loathing – that's why he's never let anyone in. Tears prick and pool in my eyes as I recall his final barriers crumbling last night, when he let me touch him. Jeez, it took Lauren and all her crazy to get us to there. Perhaps I should be grateful. The fact that he bathed her is not quite such a bitter taste on my tongue now. I wonder which clothes he gave her. I hope it wasn't the plum dress… I liked that.

So can I love this man, with all his issues, unconditionally? Because he deserves nothing less. He still needs to learn boundaries, and little things like empathy, and to be less controlling. He says he no longer feels the compulsion to hurt me; perhaps Dr. Banner will able to cast some light on that. Fundamentally, that's what concerns me most – that he needs that, and has always found likeminded women who need it too. I frown. Yes, this is the reassurance I need. I want to be all things to this man, his Alpha and his Omega, and all things in between. He can certainly talk the talk, but can he walk the walk?

So in looking to stray from the line

we decided instead

we should pull out the thread

that was stitching us into this tapestry vile,

And why wouldn't you try?

Perfect weather to Fly.

Hopefully Banner will have the answers, and maybe… maybe I can say yes. Edward and I can find our perfect weather to fly. I gaze out at busy bustling lunchtime Seattle. Mrs. Edward Cullen – who would have thought?

I glance at my watch.

Shit!

I leap up from my seat and dash to the door – a whole hour of just sitting – where did the time go? James is going to go ballistic!

-

I slink back to my desk. Fortunately he's not in his office. It looks like I've got away with it. I gaze intently at my computer screen, unseeing, trying to reassemble my thoughts into work mode.

"Where were you?"

I jump. James is standing, arms folded, behind me.

"I was in the basement, photocopying," I lie.

James lips press into a thin, uncompromising line.

"I'm leaving for my plane at 6:30. I need you to stay until then."

"Okay." I smile as sweetly as I can manage.

"I'd like my itinerary for New York printed out and photocopied ten times. And get the brochures packaged up. And get me some coffee!" he snarls and stalks into his office.

I breathe a sigh of relief, and stick my tongue out at him as he closes the door. Bastard.

-

At four o'clock, Claire rings from reception.

"I have Alice Cullen for you."

Alice? I hope she doesn't want to hang at the mall.

"Hi, Alice!"

"Bella, hi. How are you?" She sounds beyond excited about something.

"Good. Busy today. You?"

"I am so bored! I need to find something to do, so I'm arranging a birthday party for Edward."

Edward's birthday? Jeez, I had no idea.

"When is it?"

"I knew it. I knew he wouldn't tell you. It's on Saturday. Mom and Dad want everyone over for a meal to celebrate. I'm officially inviting you."

"Oh, well, that's lovely. Thank you, Alice."

"I've already called Edward and told him, and he gave me your number here."

"Cool…" My mind is wondering – what the hell am I going to get Edward for his birthday? Holy cow, what do you buy the man who has everything?

"And maybe next week, we can go out one lunchtime?"

"Sure. How about tomorrow? My boss is away in New York."

"Oh, that would be super cool, Bella. What time?"

"Say, 12:45?"

"I'll be there. Bye, Bella."

"Bye…" I hang up.

Edward. Birthday. What on earth should I get him?

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Antediluvian
Date: 17 June 2009: 16.11
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen
When, exactly, were you going to tell me?
What shall I get my **old** man for his birthday?
Perhaps some new batteries for his hearing aid?
B x

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Prehistoric
Date: 17 June 2009 16.20
To: Isabella Swan

Don't mock the elderly.
Glad you are alive and kicking.
And that Alice has been in touch.
Batteries are always useful.
I don't like celebrating my birthday.

x

Edward Cullen,
Deaf as a Post CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Hmmmm.
Date: 17 June 2009: 16.24
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen
I can imagine you pouting as you wrote that last sentence.
That does things to me.
B xoxox

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Rolling Eyes
Date: 17 June 2009 16.29
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan

WILL YOU USE YOUR BLACKBERRY!!!

x

Edward Cullen,
Twitchy Palmed, CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I roll my eyes. Why is he so touchy about emails?

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Inspiration
Date: 17 June 2009: 16.33
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen
Ah… your twitchy palms can't stay still for long can they?
I wonder what Dr. Banner would say about that?
But now I know what to give you for your birthday.
;)

Bx

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Angina
Date: 17 June 2009 16.38
To: Isabella Swan

Miss Swan
I don't think my heart could stand the strain of another email like that… or my pants for that matter.

Behave.

x

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Trying

Date: 17 June 2009: 16.42
To: Edward Cullen

Edward

I am trying to work for my very trying boss.
Please stop bothering me, and being trying yourself.
Your last email nearly made me combust.

x

PS: Can you collect me at 6:30?

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: I'll Be There
Date: 17 June 2009 16.38
To: Isabella Swan

Nothing would give me greater pleasure.
Actually, I can think of any of number of things that would give me greater pleasure, and they all involve you.

x

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

I flush reading his response, and shake my head. Email banter is all well and good, but we really need to talk. Perhaps once we've seen Banner. I put my BlackBerry down and finish my petty cash reconciliation.

-

By 6:15 the office is deserted. I have everything ready for James: his cab to the airport is booked, and I just have to hand him his documents. I glance anxiously through the glass but he's still deep in his telephone call, and I don't want to interrupt him – not in the mood he's in today.

As I sit waiting for him to finish, it occurs to me that I have not eaten today. Oh shit, that's not going to go down well with Fifty. I quickly skip down to the kitchen to see if there are any cookies left.

As I'm opening the cookie jar James appears unexpectedly in the kitchen doorway, startling me.

Oh. What's he doing here? He stares at me.

"Well, Bella, I think this might be a good time to discuss your misdemeanors."

He steps in, closing the door behind him, and my mouth instantly dries as alarm bells ring loud and piercing in my head. Oh *fuck.*

His lips twitch into a grimace of a smile and his eyes gleam a deep, dark, cobalt.

"At last, I have you on your own," he says, and he slowly licks his lower lip.

What?

"Now… are you going to be a good girl?"

Chapter 79

"And listen very carefully to what I say."

James' eyes flash, the darkest blue. Jeez, he's so angry… why? Fear chokes me. I almost stop breathing. But from somewhere deep inside, in spite of my dry mouth, I find the resolve and courage to squeeze out some words, my father's keep-them-talking-mantra circling my brain like an ethereal sentinel.

"James, now might not be a good time for this. Your cab is due in ten minutes and I need to give you all your documents." My voice is quiet but hoarse, betraying me.

He smiles, and it's a despotic, fuck-you smile that finally touches his eyes. They glint in the harsh fluorescent glow of the strip light above us in the grey, windowless room. He takes a step toward me, glaring at me intently, his eyes never leaving mine. His pupils are dilating as I watch – the black eclipsing the blue. *Oh no.* And my fear escalates.

"You know I had to fight with Victoria to give you this job…" His voice trails off as he takes another step toward me, and I step back against the dark grey wall cupboards. *Keep-him-talking, keep-him-talking, keep-him-talking…*

"James, what exactly is your problem? If you want to air your grievances then perhaps we should do this with Victoria present – since she's part of HR – in a more formal setting."

Where is Security? Are they in the building yet?

"We don't need HR to over-manage this situation Bella," he sneers. "When I hired you, I thought you would be a hard worker. I thought you had potential. But now… I don't know. You've become distracted and sloppy. And I wondered… is it your megabucks boyfriend who's leading you astray? So I had a check through your email account to see if I could find any clues. And you know what I found, Bella? Which was really strange? The only personal emails in your account were *to* your hot-shot boyfriend." He pauses, assessing my reaction.

"And then I got to thinking… where are the emails *from* him? There are none. Nada. Nothing. So what's going on, Bella? How come his emails to you aren't on our system? Are you some company spy, planted in here by Cullen's organization? Is *that* what this is?"

Holy shit… the emails. *Oh no. What have I said?*

"James, what are you talking about?" I try for genuinely bewildered, and I am pretty convincing. This conversation is not going as I expected. I still don't trust him in the

slightest. Some subliminal pheromone that James is exuding has me on high alert. This man is angry, volatile, and totally unpredictable.

I try for distraction.

"You just said that you had to persuade Victoria to hire me. So how could I be planted as a spy? Make up your mind, James."

"But Cullen scuppered the New York trip, didn't he?"

Oh shit.

"How did he manage that, Bella? What did Mr. Megabucks do?"

I feel what little blood remains in my face drain away, and I think I'm going to faint.

"I don't know what you're talking about, James," I whisper. "Your cab will be here shortly. Shall I fetch your things?" *Oh please, let me go… stop this*. James continues, apparently enjoying my discomfort.

"And he thinks I'd make a pass at you?" He smirks, and his eyes heat. "Well, I want you to think about something while I'm in New York. I gave you this job, and I expect you to show me some gratitude. In fact, I'm entitled to it. I had to fight to get you. Victoria wanted someone better qualified, but I – I saw something in you. So, we need to work out a deal. A deal where you keep me happy. Look at it as refining your job description, if you like. D'you understand me, Bella? And if you keep me happy, I won't dig any further into how your boyfriend is pulling strings, milking his contacts, or cashing in some favor from one of his Ivy League frat-boy sycophants."

My mouth drops open. He's *blackmailing* me. For sex! And what can I say? News of Edward's takeover is embargoed for another 3 weeks. I can barely believe this... Sex – with me! James moves closer until he's standing right in front of me, staring down into my eyes. I can smell his cloying sweet cologne – it's nauseating – and, if I'm not mistaken, the bitter stench of alcohol on his breath. Fuck, he's been drinking… *when?*

"You are such a tight-assed, cock-blocking prick-tease, you know that, Bella?" he whispers through clenched teeth.

What? Prick-tease… Me?!

"James, I have no idea what you're talking about," I whisper, as I feel the adrenaline surge through my body. He's closer now. I am waiting to make my move. Charlie will be proud. Charlie taught me what to do, if James touches me – if he even breathes too close to me. My breath is shallow. *I must not faint, I must not faint.*

"Look at you. You're so turned on, I can tell. You've really led me on. Deep down you want me… I know it. So do you."

Holy fuck. The man is completely delusional. My fear rises to Defcon 1, threatening to overwhelm me.

"No, James. I have never led you on."

"Yes, you have. I can read the signs."

Reaching up, he very gently strokes my face with the back of his knuckles, down to my chin. His index finger strokes my throat, as my heart leaps into my mouth as I fight my gag reflex. He reaches the dip at the base of my neck, where the top button of my black shirt is open, and presses his hand against my chest.

"You want me. Admit it, Bella."

Keeping my eyes firmly fixed on his, and concentrating on what I have to do – rather than my mushrooming revulsion and dread – I place my hand gently over his, in a caress. He smiles slightly, and I grab his little finger, and twist it back, pulling it sharply down backwards to his hip.

"Arrgh!" He cries out in pain and surprise, and as he leans off balance, I bring my knee, swift and hard, up into his groin, making perfect contact with my goal. I dodge deftly to my left as his knees buckle and he collapses groaning onto the kitchen floor, grasping himself between his legs.

"Don't you ever touch me again," I snarl at him. "Your itinerary and the brochures are packaged on my desk. I am going home now. Have a nice trip. And in the future, get your own damn coffee."

"You fucking bitch!" he half screams, half groans at me, but I am already out the door.

I run full pelt to my desk, grab my jacket and my purse, and dash to front reception, ignoring the moans and curses emanating from the bastard still prostrate on the kitchen floor. I burst out of the front door and stop for a moment as the cool air hits my face, take a deep breath, and compose myself. But I haven't eaten all day, and as the very unwelcome surge of adrenaline recedes, my legs give out beneath me and I sink to the ground.

I watch with mild detachment the slow motion movie that plays out in front of me: Edward and Taylor, in dark suits and white shirts, leaping out of the waiting car and running towards me… Edward sinking to his knees at my side… and, on some unconscious level, all I can think is – he's here. My love is here.

"Bella, Bella! What's wrong?" He scoops me into his lap, running his hands up and down my arms, checking for any signs of injury. Grabbing my head between his hands, he stares with wide, terrified green eyes into mine. I sag against him, suddenly overwhelmed with relief and fatigue. Oh, Edward's arms. There is no place I'd rather be.

"Bella." He shakes me slightly. "What's wrong? Are you sick?"

I shake my head as I realize I need to start communicating.

"James," I whisper, and I sense rather than see Edward's swift glance at Taylor, who abruptly disappears into the building.

"Oh fuck!" Edward folds me in his arms. "What did that sleazeball do to you?"

And from somewhere just the right side of crazy, I feel a giggle bubbling in my throat. I recall James's utter shock as I grabbed his finger.

"It's what *I* did to *him*," I giggle, and I can't stop.

"Bella!" Edward shakes me again, and my giggling fit ceases. "Did he touch you?"

"Only once."

I feel Edward's muscles bunch and tense as rage sweeps through him, and he stands up swiftly, powerfully – rock steady – with me in his arms. He's furious.*No!*

"Where is that fucker?"

From inside the building we hear muffled shouting. Edward sets me on my feet.

"Can you stand?"

I nod. "Don't go in. Don't, Edward." Suddenly my fear is back; fear of what Edward will do to James.

"Get in the car," he barks at me.

"Edward, no." I grab his arm.

"Get in the goddamned car, Bella." He shakes me off.

"No, Edward! Please!" I plead with him. "Stay. Don't leave me on my own." I deploy my ultimate weapon.

Seething, Edward runs his hand through his hair, glaring down at me, clearly wracked with indecision. The shouting inside the building escalates, then stops suddenly.

Oh, no. What has Taylor done?

Edward fishes out his BlackBerry.

"Edward, he has my emails."

"What?"

"My emails to you. He wanted to know where your emails to me were. He was trying to blackmail me."

Edward's look is murderous. *Oh shit.*

"Fuck!" he splutters and narrows his eyes at me. He punches a number into his BlackBerry. *Oh no. I'm in trouble.*

Who's he calling?

"Barney. Cullen. I need you to access the SIP main server and wipe all Isabella Swan's emails to me. Then access the personal data files of James Smith and check they aren't stored there. If they are, wipe them… Yes, all of them. Now. Let me know when it's done."

He stabs the off switch, then dials another number.

"Roach. Cullen. Smith – I want him out. Now, this minute. Call security, get him to clear his desk immediately, or I will liquidate this company first thing in the morning. You already have all the justification you need to give him his pink slip. Do you understand?" He listens for a moment and seemingly satisfied hangs up.

"BlackBerry," he hisses at me through clenched teeth.

"Please don't be mad at me." I blink up at him.

"I am so… mad at you right now…" He trails off and once more sweeps his hand through his hair. "Get in the car."

"Edward, please –"

"Get in the fucking car, Isabella, or so help me I'll put you in there myself," he threatens, his eyes blazing with fury. *Oh shit.*

"Don't do anything stupid, please," I beg.

"STUPID?" he explodes. "I told you to use your fucking BlackBerry. Don't talk to me about stupid. Get in the motherfucking car, Isabella – NOW!" he snarls, and a frisson of fear runs through me. This is Very Angry Edward. I've not seen him this mad before. He's barely holding on to his self-control.

"Okay," I mutter, placating him. "But please, be careful."

Pressing his lips together in a hard line he points angrily to the car, glaring at me. Jeez, okay, I get the message.

"Please be careful. I don't want anything to happen to you. It would kill me," I murmur. He blinks at me rapidly and stills, lowering his arm, while he takes a deep breath.

"I'll be careful," he says, his eyes softening slightly.

Oh, thank the Lord. I can feel Edward's eyes burning into me as I head to the car, open the front passenger door and climb in. Once I'm safely in the comfort of the Mercedes he disappears into the building, and my heart leaps again into my throat. What's he planning to do?

I sit and wait. And wait… and wait… five eternal minutes.

James' cab pulls up in front of the Merc. Ten minutes. Fifteen. Jeez, what are they doing in there, and how is Taylor? The waiting is agonizing.

Twenty-five minutes later, James emerges from the building, clutching a cardboard storage box. Behind him is the security guy. Where was he earlier? And after them, Edward and Taylor. James looks sick. He heads straight for the cab, and I'm grateful that the Mercedes has blacked-out windows so he cannot see me. The cab drives off – presumably not to Seatac – as Edward and Taylor reach the car. Opening the driver's door, Edward slides smoothly into the seat, presumably because I am in the front, and Taylor gets in behind me. Neither of them says a word as Edward starts the car and pulls out into the traffic. I risk a quick glance at Fifty. His mouth is set in a firm line, but he seems distracted. The in-car phone rings.

"Cullen," Edward snaps.

"Mr. Cullen, Barney here."

"Barney, I'm on speaker phone, and there are others in the car," Edward warns.

"Sir, it's all done. But I need to talk to you about what else I found on Mr. Smith's computer."

"I'll call you when I reach my destination. And thanks, Barney."

"No problem, Mr. Cullen."

Barney hangs up. He sounds much younger than I expected.

What else is on James' computer?

"Are you talking to me?" I ask quietly.

Edward glances at me, before fixing his eyes back on the road ahead, and I can tell he's still mad.

"No," he mutters mulishly.

Oh, there we go… how childish. I wrap my arms around myself and stare unseeing out of the window. Perhaps I should just ask him to drop me off at my apartment, then he can not talk to me from the safety of Escala, and save us both the inevitable quarrel. But even as I think it, I know I don't want to leave him to brood.

Eventually we pull up in front of his apartment building and Edward climbs out of the car. Moving with easy grace around to my side, he opens my door.

"Come," he orders, as Taylor clambers into the driving seat.

I take his proffered hand and follow him through the grand foyer to the elevator. He doesn't let go of me.

"Edward, why are you so mad at me?" I whisper as we wait.

"You know why," he mutters as we step into the elevator and he punches in the code to his floor. "God, if something had happened to you… he'd be dead by now." Edward's tone chills me to the bone.

The doors close.

"As it is, I'm going to ruin his career so he can't take advantage of young women any more… miserable excuse for a man that he is." He shakes his head. "Jesus, Bella!" He grabs me suddenly and pushes me into the corner of the elevator, imprisoning me, his hands in my hair, pulling my face up to his, his mouth is on mine. I don't know why it takes me by surprise, but it does, and there's a passionate desperation in his kiss. I can taste his relief,

his longing, and his residual anger as his tongue possesses my mouth. He stops, gazing down at me, resting his weight against me so I can't move, and I'm breathless, clinging to him for support, staring up into that beautiful face etched with determination, without any trace of humor.

"If anything had happened to you… If he'd harmed you…" I feel the shudder that runs through him. "BlackBerry," he commands quietly. "From now on. Understand?"

I nod, swallowing, unable to break eye contact from his grim, mesmerizing look. He straightens, releasing me, as the elevator comes to a stop.

"Kicked him in the balls, he said." Edward's tone is lighter. I think I'm forgiven.

"Yes," I whisper, still reeling from the intensity of his kiss and his impassioned command.

"Good."

"I am my father's daughter, Edward."

"I'm very glad you are," he breathes and adds mockingly, "And I'll need to remember that." Taking my hand, he leads me out of the elevator and I follow him, relieved. I think that's as bad as his mood is going to get.

"I need to call Barney. I won't be long." He disappears into this study leaving me stranded in the vast living room. Mrs. Cope is adding the finishing touches to our meal. I realize I am famished, but I need something to do.

"Can I help?" I ask.

She laughs. "No, Bella. Can I fix you a drink or something? You look beat."

"I'd love a glass of wine."

"White?"

"Yes, please."

I perch on one of the bar stools, and Mrs. Cope hands me a glass of chilled wine. I don't know what it is, but it's delicious, and slides down easily, soothing my shattered nerves. What was I thinking about earlier today? How alive I have felt since I met Edward. How exciting my life has become. Jeez, could I just have a few boring days?

What if I'd never met Edward? I'd be holed up in my apartment, talking it through with Jasper, completely freaked by my encounter with James, knowing I would have to face the

sleazeball again on Friday. As it is, there's every chance I'll never set eyes on him again. But who will I work for now? I frown. I hadn't thought of that. Shit, do I even have a job?

"Evening, Gail," Edward says as he comes back into the great room, dragging me from my thoughts. Heading straight to the fridge, he pours himself a glass of wine.

"Good evening Mr. Cullen. Dinner in ten, Sir?"

"Sounds good."

Edward raises his glass.

"To police chiefs' daughters," he says, and his eyes soften.

"Cheers," I mutter, raising my glass.

"What's wrong?" Edward asks.

"I don't know if I still have a job."

He cocks his head sideways at me.

"Do you still want one?"

"Of course."

"Then you still have one."

Simple. See? He is master of my universe.

I roll my eyes at him and he smiles.

Mrs. Cope makes a mean fish pie. She has left us to enjoy the fruits of her labors, and I feel much better now I've had something to eat. We are sitting at the breakfast bar, and in spite of my best cajoling, Edward won't tell me what Barney has found on James' computer. I drop the subject, and decide to tackle instead the thorny issue of Jake's impending visit.

"Jake called," I say nonchalantly.

"Oh?" Edward turns to face me.

"He wants to deliver your photos on Friday."

"A personal delivery. How accommodating of him," Edward mutters.

"He wants to go out. For a drink. With me."

"I see."

"And Rose and Emmett should be back," I add quickly.

Edward puts his fork down, frowning at me.

"What exactly are you asking?"

"I'm not asking anything. I'm informing you of my plans for Friday," I bristle.

"Look, I want to see Jake, and he wants to stay over. Either he stays here or he stays at my place, but I will be there too."

Edward's lips part slightly. He looks dumbfounded.

"He made a pass at you."

"Edward, that was ages ago. He was drunk, I was drunk, you saved the day – it won't happen again. He's no James, for heaven's sake."

"Jasper's there. He can keep him company."

"He wants to see me, not Jasper."

Edward scowls at me.

"He's just a friend." My voice is emphatic.

"I don't like it."

What? Well, tough… And I can't help my irritation.

"Just because you don't have any friends. Apart from that god-awful woman who beat the shit out of you, the one you've fucked in ways I can't imagine. I don't moan about you seeing her!" I snap at him.

Edward blinks at me, shocked.

"I. Want. To. See. Him."

My subconscious is alarmed. Are you stamping your little foot? Steady…

Green eyes blaze at me.

"Is that what you think?" he breathes.

"Think about what?"

"Irina. You'd rather I didn't see her?"

Holy cow.

"Exactly. I'd rather you didn't see her."

"Oh. Why didn't you say?"

"Because it's not my place to say. You think she's your only friend." I shrug in exasperation. He really doesn't get it. How did this turn into a conversation about her? I don't even want to think about her. I try and steer us back on-message. "Just as it's not your place to say if I can or can't see Jake. Don't you see that?"

Edward gazes at me, perplexed, I think. *Oh, what is he thinking?*

"He can stay here, I suppose," he says eventually, but can't hide the begrudging tone in his voice.

Hallelujah!

"Thank you! You know, if I am going to live here too…" I trail off.

Edward nods. He knows what I'm trying to say.

"It's not like you haven't got the space," I smirk.

His lips quirk up slowly.

"Are you smirking at me, Miss Swan?"

"Most definitely, Mr. Cullen."

I get up, clear our plates, and load them into the dishwasher.

"Gail will do that."

"I've done it now." I stand up and gaze at him. He's watching me intently.

"I have to work for a while," he says apologetically.

"Cool. I'll find something to do."

"Come here," he orders, but his voice is soft and seductive, his eyes heated. I don't hesitate to walk into his arms, clasping him around his neck as he perches on his bar stool. He wraps his arms around me, crushes me to him and just holds me. I melt. I feel safe, cherished, and loved, all at once. It's blissful. Closing my eyes, I enjoy the feel of being held by him. I love this man. I love his intoxicating scent, his strength, his mercurial ways… my Fifty.

"Let's not fight," he breathes. He kisses my hair and inhales deeply. "You smell heavenly, as usual, Bella."

"So do you," I whisper and kiss his neck.

All too soon he releases me.

"I should only be a couple of hours."

I wander listlessly through the apartment. Edward is still working. I have showered and dressed, in some sweats and a t-shirt of my own… and I'm bored. I don't want to read. If I sit still, I recall James and his fingers on me.

I check out my old bedroom, the subs' room. Jake can sleep here, he'll like the view. It's about 8:15, and the sun is beginning to sink into the west, and the lights of the city twinkle below me. It's glorious. Yes, Jake will like it here. I wonder idly where Edward will hang Jake's pictures of me. I'd rather he didn't. I am not keen on looking at myself.

Back down the hallway I find myself outside the playroom, and without thinking, I try the door handle. Edward normally keeps it locked, but to my surprise, the door opens… how strange. Feeling like a child playing hookey, straying into the forbidden forest, I walk in. It's dark. I flick the switch and the lights under the cornice light up with a soft glow. It's as I remember it. A womb-like room. Memories of the last time I was in here flash through my mind. The belt… I wince at the recollection. Now it hangs innocently, lined up with others, on the rack beside the door. Tentatively I run my fingers over them, and the floggers, the paddles, and the whips. Sheesh. This is what I need to square with Dr. Banner. Can someone in this lifestyle just stop? It seems so improbable. Wandering over to the bed, I sit on soft red satin sheets, gazing around at all the… apparatus.

Beside me the bench, above that the assortment of canes… so many! Surely one is enough? Well, the less said about that the better. And the large table. We never tried that, whatever he does on it. My eyes fall on the chesterfield, and I move over to sit on it. It's just a couch, nothing extraordinary about it – nothing to fasten anything to, not that I can see. Glancing behind me, I spy the museum chest. My curiosity is piqued. What does he keep in there?

As I pull open the top drawer I realize my blood is pounding through my veins. Why am I so nervous? This feels so… illicit. Like I'm trespassing, which of course I am. But if he wants to marry me, well…

Holy fuck, what's all this? An array of instruments and bizarre implements – I don't have a clue what they are, or what they're for – is carefully laid out in the display drawer. I pick one up. It's bullet-shaped, with a sort of handle. Hmmm… what the hell do you do with that? My mind boggles, though I think I have an idea. Jeez, there are four different sizes! My scalp prickles, and I glance up.

Edward is standing in the doorway, staring at me, his face unreadable. *How long has he been there?* I feel like I've been caught with my hand in the cookie jar.

"Hi." I smile nervously at him, and I know my eyes are wide, and that I've gone deathly pale.

"What are you doing?" he says softly, but I can hear the undercurrent in his tone.

Oh shit. Is he mad? I flush.

"Err… I was bored, and curious," I mutter, embarrassed to be found out. He said he'd be two hours.

"That's a very dangerous combination." He runs his long index finger across his full lower lip in quiet contemplation, not taking his eyes off me.

I swallow, and my mouth is dry. Slowly, he enters the room and closes the door quietly behind him, his eyes liquid green fire. *holy cow.* He leans, deceptively casually, over the chest of drawers. My inner goddess doesn't know whether it's fight or flight time.

"So, what exactly are you curious about, Miss Swan? Perhaps I could enlighten you."

Chapter 80

“The door was open… I–” I gaze at Edward as I hold my breath and blink, uncertain as ever of his reaction or what I should say.

His eyes are dark. I think he‘s amused, but it‘s difficult to tell. He rests his chin on his hand, leaning over the chest of drawers.

“I was in here earlier today, wondering what to do with it all. I must have forgotten to lock it.” He scowls momentarily, as if leaving the door unlocked was a terrible lapse in judgment. I frown – it‘s not like him to be forgetful.

“Oh?”

“But now here you are, curious as ever.” His voice is soft, puzzled.

“You‘re not mad?” I whisper, using my remaining breath.

He cocks his head to one side, and I can see his lips twitch in amusement.

“Why would I be mad?”

“I feel like I‘m trespassing… and you‘re always mad at me.” My voice is quiet, though I‘m relieved. Edward‘s brow creases once more.

“Yes, you‘re trespassing, but I‘m not mad. I hope that one day you‘ll live with me here, and all this…” He gestures vaguely round the room with one hand. “Will be yours too.”

My playroom… eh? I gape at him – that‘s a lot to take on board.

“That‘s why I was in here today. Trying to decide what to do.” He taps his lips with his index finger. “Am I mad with you all the time? I wasn‘t this morning.”

Oh, that‘s true. I smile at the memory of Edward when we woke and it distracts me from the thought of what will be become of the playroom. He was such Fun Fifty this morning.

“You were playful. I like playful Edward.”

“Do you now?” He arches an eyebrow at me, and his beautiful mouth curves up in a smile, a shy smile. Wow!

“What‘s this?” I hold up the silver bullet thing.

“Always hungry for information, Miss Swan. That‘s a butt plug,” he says gently.

“Oh…”

“Bought for you.”

What?

“For me?”

He nods slowly, his face now serious and wary. I frown.

“You buy new errr… toys… for each submissive?”

“Some things. Yes.”

“Butt plugs?”

“Yes.‖

Okay… I swallow. Butt plug. It‘s solid metal – surely that‘s uncomfortable? I remember our discussion about sex toys and hard limits after I graduated. I think at the time I said I would try. Now, actually seeing one, I don‘t know if it‘s something I want to do. I examine it once more and place it back in the drawer.

“And this?” I take out a long, black rubbery object, made of gradually diminishing spherical bubbles joined together, the first one large and the last much smaller. Eight bubbles in total.

“Anal beads,” says Edward, watching me carefully.

Oh! I examine them with fascinated horror. All of these, inside me… there! I had no idea.

“They have quite an effect if you pull them out mid-orgasm,” he adds matter-of-factly.

“This is for me?” I whisper.

“For you.” He nods slowly.

“This is the butt drawer?”

He smirks.

“If you like.‖

I close it quickly, flushing like a stoplight. Tentatively, I open the second drawer.

“Don‘t you like the butt drawer?” he asks innocently, amused. I gaze at him and shrug, trying to brazen out my shock.

“It‘s not top of my Christmas card list,” I mutter nonchalantly.

He grins.

“Next drawer down holds a selection of vibrators.” I shut the drawer quickly.

“And the next?” I whisper, ashen once more, but this time with embarrassment.

“That‘s more interesting.” Oh! I hesitantly pull the drawer open, not taking my eyes off his beautiful but rather smug face. It holds an assortment of metal items. I pick up one at random, a large clip-like device.

“Genital clamp,” Edward says. He stands up and moves casually around so that he‘s beside me.

I put it back immediately and chose something more delicate – two small clips on a chain.

“Some of these are for pain, but most are for pleasure,” he murmurs.

“What‘s this?”

“Nipple clamps – that‘s for both.”

“Both? Nipples?‖

Edward smirks at me. “Well, there are two clamps baby. Yes, both nipples, but that‘s not what I meant. These are for both pleasure and pain.”

Oh. He takes it from me.

“Hold out your little finger.”

I do as he asks, and he clamps one clip to the tip of my finger. It‘s not too harsh.

“The sensation is very intense, but it‘s when taking them off that they are at their most…painful and pleasurable.” I remove the clip. Hmmm, that might be nice. I squirm at the thought.

“I like the look of these,” I murmur and Edward smiles.

“Do you now, Miss Swan? I think I can tell.”

I nod shyly, biting my lip. He reaches up and tugs at my chin so I release my bottom lip.

“You know what that does to me,” he murmurs.

I put the clips back in the drawer, and Edward leans forward and pulls out two more.

“These are adjustable.” He holds them up for me to inspect.

“Adjustable?”

“You can wear them very tight… or not. Depending on your mood.”

How does he make that sound so erotic? I swallow, and to divert his attention, pull out a device that looks like a spiky pastry cutter.

“This?” I frown. No baking in the playroom, surely.

“That‘s a Wartenberg pinwheel.”

“For?” He reaches over and takes it from me.

“Give me your hand. Palm up.”

I offer him my left hand and he takes it gently, skating his thumb over my knuckles. A shiver runs through me. His skin against mine, it never fails to thrill me. He runs the wheel over my palm.

“Ah!” The prongs bite into my skin… it‘s only just not painful. In fact it tickles slightly.

“Imagine that over your breasts,” Edward murmurs lasciviously.

Oh! I flush, and snatch my hand back. My breathing increases. Holy cow.

“There‘s a fine line between pleasure and pain, Isabella,” he says softly, as he leans down and puts the device back in the drawer. I lean against the drawer so it closes.

“Is that all?” Edward looks amused.

“No…” I pull open the fourth drawer, to be confounded by a mass of leather and straps. I tug at one of the straps… it appears to be attached to a ball.

“Ball gag. To keep you quiet,” says Edward, amused once more.

“Soft limit,” I mutter.

“I remember,” he says. “But you can still breathe. Your teeth clamp over the ball.” Taking it from me he replicates a mouth clamping down on the ball with his fingers.

“Have you worn one of these?” I ask.

“Yes.” He stills and gazes down at me.

“To mask your screams?” He closes his eyes, and I can tell it‘s in exasperation.

“No, that‘s not what they‘re about.”

Oh?

“It‘s about control, Isabella. How helpless would you be if you were tied up and couldn‘t speak? How trusting would you have to be, knowing I had that much power over you? That I had to read your body and your reaction, rather than hear your words. It makes you more dependent, puts me in ultimate control.”

I swallow.

“You sound like you miss it.”

“It‘s what I know,” he murmurs, gazing down at me. His green eyes are wide and serious, and the atmosphere between us has changed, as if he‘s in the confessional.

“You have power over me. You know you do,” I whisper.

“Do I? You make me feel… helpless.”

“No!” Oh Fifty… “Why?”

“Because you‘re the only person I know who could really hurt me.”

He reaches up and tucks my hair behind my ear.

“Oh Edward… that works both ways. If you didn‘t want me–” I shudder, glancing down at my twisting fingers. Therein lies my other dark reservation about us. If he wasn‘t so… broken, would he want me? I shake my head. I must try not to think like that.

“The last thing I want to do is hurt you. I love you,” I murmur, and reaching up, run my fingers through his sideburn to gently stroke his cheek. He leans his face into my touch,

dropping the gag back in the drawer, and reaches for me, his hands around my waist. He pulls me against him.

“Have we finished show and tell?” he asks, his voice soft and seductive. His hand moves up my back to the nape of my neck.

“Why? What did you want to do?” He bends and kisses me gently, and I melt against him, grasping his arms.

“Bella, you were nearly attacked today.” His voice is soft, but ice-cold and wary.

“So?” I breathe, enjoying the feel of his hand at my back, and his intoxicating proximity. He pulls his head back and scowls down at me.

“What do you mean, ‘so’?” he rebukes. I gaze up into his lovely grumpy face, and I am dazzled.

“Edward, I‘m fine.”

He wraps me in his arms holding me close, holding me tight.

“When I think what might have happened,” he breathes, burying his face in my hair.

“When will you learn that I‘m stronger than I look?” I whisper reassuringly into his neck, inhaling his delicious scent. There is nothing better on the planet than being in Edward‘s arms.

“I know you‘re strong,” Edward muses quietly. He kisses my hair, then releases me. Bending down I fish another item out of the open drawer. Several cuffs, attached to a bar. I hold it up.

“That,” says Edward, his eyes darkening. “Is a spreader bar with ankle and wrist restraints.”

“How does it work?” I ask, genuinely intrigued. My inner goddess pops her head out of her bunker.

“You want me to show you?” he breathes in surprise, closing his eyes briefly. I blink at him. When he opens his eyes they are blazing. Oh my.

“Yes, I want a demonstration. I like being tied up,” I whisper as my inner goddess pole vaults from the bunker onto her chaise longue.

“Oh, Bella,” he murmurs. He looks pained all of a sudden.

"What?"

"Not here."

"What do you mean?"

"I want you in my bed, not in here. Come." He grabs the bar and clasping my hand leads me promptly out of the room. Why are we leaving? I glance behind me as we exit.

"Why not in there?"

Edward stops on the stairs and gazes up at me, his expression grave.

"Bella, you may be ready to go back in there, but I'm not. Last time we were in there you left me. I keep telling you – when will you understand?" He frowns, releasing me so that he can gesticulate with his free hand.

"My whole attitude has changed as a result. My whole outlook on life has radically shifted. I've told you this. What I haven't told you is –" He stops and runs his hand through his hair, searching for the correct words. "I'm like a recovering alcoholic, okay? That's the only comparison I can draw. And I don't want to hurt you."

He looks so contrite, and in that moment, a sharp nagging pain lances through me. What have I done to this man? Have I improved his life? He was happy before he met me, wasn't he?

"I can't bear to hurt you, because I love you," he adds, gazing up at me, his expression one of absolute sincerity, like a small boy telling a very simple truth. He's completely guileless, and he takes my breath away. I adore him more than anything or anyone – I love this man unconditionally. I launch myself at him, so hard he has to drop what he's carrying to catch me, as I push him up against the wall. Grabbing his face between my hands, I pull his lips to mine. I can taste his surprise as I push my tongue into his mouth. I am standing on the step above him – we're on a level, and I feel euphorically empowered. Kissing him passionately, my fingers twisting into his hair, I want to touch him, everywhere, but restrain myself, knowing his fear. In spite of this knowledge my desire unfurls, hot and heavy, blossoming deep in my belly. He groans and grabs my shoulders, pushing me away.

"Do you want me to fuck you on the stairs?" he mutters, his breathing ragged. "Because right now, I will."

"Yes," I murmur, and I'm sure my dark gaze matches his

He glares at me, his eyes hooded and heavy

“No. I want you in my bed.” He scoops me up suddenly over his shoulder, making me squeal, loudly, and smacks me hard on my behind, so that I squeal again. As he heads down the stairs he stoops to pick up the fallen spreader bar.

Mrs.. Cope is coming out of the utility room when we pass through the hall. She smiles at us and I give her an apologetic upside-down wave… I don‘t think Edward notices her.

In the bedroom he sets me down on my feet and drops the spreader on to the bed.

“I don‘t think you‘ll hurt me,” I breathe.

“I don‘t think I‘ll hurt you either,” he says. He takes my head in his hands and kisses me, long and hard, igniting my already heated blood.

“I want you so much,” he breathes against my mouth, panting. “Are you sure about this – after today?‘

“Yes. I want you, too. I want to undress you.” I can‘t wait to get my hands on him – my fingers are itching to touch him.

His eyes widen slightly and for a moment he hesitates, perhaps to consider my request.

“Okay,” he says cautiously.

I reach for the second button on his shirt and I hear him catch his breath.

“I won‘t touch you if you don‘t want me to,” I whisper.

“No,” he responds quickly. “Do. It‘s fine. I‘m good,” he mutters.

I gently undo the button and my fingers glide down his shirt to the next. His eyes are large and luminous, his lips parted as his breathing shallows. He is so beautiful, even in his fear… because of his fear. I undo the third button and I can see his soft hair poking through the large vee of the shirt.

“I want to kiss you there,” I murmur.

He inhales sharply.

“Kiss me?” “Yes,” I murmur.

His eyes widen as I undo the next button and very slowly lean forward, making my intention clear. He‘s holding his breath, but stands stock-still as I plant a gentle kiss among

the soft, exposed curls. I undo the final button and lift my face to him. He‘s gazing at me, and there‘s a look of satisfaction, calm, and… wonder on his face.

“It‘s getting easier isn‘t it?” I whisper.

He nods as I slowly push his shirt off his shoulders and let it fall to the floor.

“What have you done to me Bella?” he murmurs. “Whatever it is, don‘t stop.” And he gathers me in his arms, fisting both his hands in my hair, pulling my head right back so that he can have easy access to my throat.

Oh my… He runs his lips up to my jaw, nipping softly. I groan… Oh, I want this man. My fingers fumble at his waistband, undoing the button, pulling down the zipper.

“Oh baby,” he breathes as he kisses me behind my ear.

I can feel his erection, firm and hard, straining. I want it – in my mouth. I step back from him abruptly and drop to my knees.

“Whoa?” he gasps.

I tug his pants and boxers sharply, he springs free and before he can stop me, I have taken him into my mouth, sucking hard, just watching his shocked astonishment, his mouth dropping open. The way he closes his eyes, enjoying the blissful carnal pleasure, is so arousing. I know what I can do to him, and it‘s hedonistic, liberating, and sexy as hell. I feel omniscient.

“Fuck,” he hisses, and gently cradles my head, flexing his hips, so he‘s deeper inside my mouth. Oh yes, I want this. I sheath my teeth and swirl my tongue around him, pulling hard… over and over.

“Bella…” And he tries to step back.

Oh no you don‟t, Cullen. I want you. I grab his hips firmly, doubling my efforts, and I can tell he‘s close.

“Please,” he pants. “I‘m gonna come, Bella…” he groans.

Good. My inner goddess‘s head is thrown back in ecstasy… and he comes, loudly and wetly, into my mouth.

He opens his bright emerald eyes, gazing down at me, and I smile up at him, licking my lips. He grins back at me, a wicked, salacious grin.

“Oh, so this is the game we‘re playing, Miss Swan?” He bends, hooks his hands under my arms and pulls me to my feet. Suddenly his mouth is on and in mine. He groans.

“I can taste myself. You taste better,” he breathes against my lips. He tugs my t-shirt off and throws it carelessly onto the floor, then picks me up and tosses me on to the bed. Grabbing the end of my sweats he tugs abruptly, so that they come off in one swift movement. I am naked underneath, sprawled across his bed. Waiting. Wanting. He gazes down at me, drinking me in… and slowly removes his remaining clothes, not taking his eyes off me.

“You are one beautiful woman, Isabella,” he murmurs appreciatively.

Hmmm… I tilt my head coquettishly to one side and beam at him.

“You are one beautiful man, Edward, and you taste mighty fine.”

“Do I now?” he says softly, reaching for the spreader. Grabbing my left ankle he quickly cuffs it, strapping the buckle tightly, but not too tightly. He tests how much room I have by sliding his little finger between the cuff and my ankle. He doesn‘t take his eyes off mine – he doesn‘t need to see what he‘s doing. Hmmm… he‘s done this before.

“We‘ll have to see how you taste. If I recall, you‘re a rare, exquisite delicacy, Miss Swan.”

Oh… Grasping my other ankle, he quickly and efficiently cuffs that one as well, so that my feet are about two feet apart.

“The good thing about this spreader is… it expands,” he murmurs. He clicks something on the bar, then pushes, so my legs spread further – Whoa…three feet apart. My mouth drops open, and I take a deep breath. Fuck, this is hot. I‘m on fire… restless and needy.

Edward licks his lower lip. “Oh, we‘re going to have some fun with this, Bella.” Reaching down he grasps the bar and twists it so I flip on to my front. It takes me by surprise.

“See what I can do to you?” he says darkly, and twists it again, so abruptly I am once more on my back, gaping up at him, breathless.

“These other cuffs are for your wrists. I‘ll think about that. Depends if you behave or not.”

“When do I not behave?”

“I can think of a few transgressions,” he says softly, running his fingers up the soles of my feet. It tickles, but the bar holds me in place, though I try to writhe away from his fingers.“Your BlackBerry for one.”

I gasp. “What are you going to do?”

“Oh, I never disclose my plans.” He smirks at me, his eyes alight with pure devilment. Holy crow. He‘s so mind-bogglingly beautiful, it takes my breath away.

He pulls the bar sharply up, lifting my legs into the air, pulls it over his head as he crawls on to the bed, then lets it down, so it‘s resting on the back of his calves. He‘s kneeling between my legs… gloriously naked… and I‘m helpless.

“Hmmm. You are so exposed, Miss Swan.” He runs the fingers of both his hands up the inside of each of my legs… slowly… surely, making small circular patterns. Never breaking eye contact with me.

“It‘s all about anticipation, Bella. What will I do to you?”

His softly spoken words penetrate right to the deepest, darkest, part of me. I wriggle on the bed and moan. His fingers continue their slow assault up my legs, past the backs of my knees. Instinctively, I want to close my legs… and I can‘t.

“Remember, if you don‘t like something, just tell me to stop,” he murmurs. Bending over he kisses my belly… soft, sucky kisses, while his hands continue their slow tortuous journey north… up my inner thighs… touching and teasing.

“Oh please, Edward,” I breathe.

“Oh, Miss Swan. I‘ve discovered you can be merciless in your amorous assaults upon me. I think I should return the favor.” My fingers clutch the duvet as I surrender myself to him, his mouth gently heading south, his fingers north… to the vulnerable and exposed apex of my thighs. I groan as he eases his fingers inside me, and buck my pelvis up to meet them. Edward moans in response.

“You never cease to amaze me Bella. You‘re so wet,” he murmurs, against the line where my pubic hair joins my belly. My body bows as his mouth finds me. Oh my… He begins a slow and sensual assault, swirling around and around, while his fingers move inside me. Oh my… Because I can‘t close my legs, or move, it‘s so intense, so mind-blowing. My back arches as I try to absorb the sensations.

“Oh, Edward,” I cry.

“I know, baby,” he breathes, and to ease up on me, he blows softly on the most sensitive part of my body.

“Arrgh! Please!” I beg.

“Say my name,” he commands.

“Edward,” I call, hardly recognizing my own voice… it‘s so high-pitched and needy.

“Again,” he breathes.

“Edward, Edward, Edward Cullen,” I call out… loudly.

“You are mine,” he breathes and with one last flick of his tongue, I fall… spectacularly, embracing my orgasm, and because my legs are so far apart, it goes on and on and I am lost.

—

Vaguely I‘m aware that Edward has flipped me on to my front.

“We‘re going to try this, baby. If you don‘t like it, or it‘s too uncomfortable, tell me, and we‘ll stop.”

What? I am too lost in the afterglow to form any sentient, coherent thoughts. I am sitting on Edward‘s lap. How did that happen?

“Lean down baby,” he murmurs at my ear. “Head and chest on the bed.”

In a daze I do as I‘m told. He pulls both my hands backwards, and cuffs them to the bar… next to my ankles… oh. My knees are drawn up, my ass in the air, utterly vulnerable… completely his.

“Bella, you look so beautiful.” His voice is awed.

He runs his fingers from the base of my spine down towards my sex… and pauses a beat over my ass.

“When you‘re ready, I want this too…” His finger is hovering over me. I gasp loudly as I feel myself tense under his gentle probing. “Not today sweet Bella, but one day… I want you every way. I want to possess every inch of you. You‘re mine.”

Holy cow, he wants me there. I think about the butt plug, and everything tightens deep inside me. His words make me groan, and his fingers move down and around to more familiar territory and moments later, he‘s in me – Aagh! – slamming into me.

“Gently,” I cry, and he stills.

“You okay?”

“Gently… let me get used to this.” He eases slowly out of me, then eases gently back… filling me, stretching me, twice, thrice… and I am helpless.

“Yes, good, I‘ve got it now,” I murmur, relishing the feeling. He groans, and picks up his rhythm, moving… moving… relentless… onwards, inwards, filling me… and it‘s fucking exquisite. Oh my... There‘s a joy in my helplessness… in him lost in me, the way he wants me… I can do this. He takes me to these dark places, places I didn‘t know existed, and together we fill them with blinding light. Oh yes. And I let go, glorying in what he does to me, finding my sweet, sweet release, as I come, again, loudly, screaming his name. And he stills, pouring himself into me.

“Bella, baby…” he cries, and collapses beside me.

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I feel his fingers deftly undoing the straps, rubbing my ankles, then my wrists.

When he‘s finished and I‘m finally free, he pulls me into his arms, and I drift, exhausted. When I surface again, I am curled beside him and he‘s gazing at me. I have no idea what the time is.

“I could watch you sleep forever, Bella,” he murmurs and he kisses my forehead.

I smile and shift languorously beside him.

“I never want to let you go,” he says softly and wraps his arms around me.

Hmmm.

“I never want to go. Never let me go,” I mutter sleepily, my eyelids refusing to open.

“I need you,” he whispers but his voice is a distant, ethereal part of my dreams. He needs me… needs me… and as I finally slip into the darkness, my last thoughts are of a small boy with green eyes and copper-colored hair smiling shyly at me.

Chapter 81

Hmmm.

Edward is nuzzling my neck as I slowly wake.

"Morning, baby," he whispers and nips at my earlobe. My eyes flutter open and close again quickly. Bright early morning light floods the room, and his hand is softly caressing my breast, gently teasing me. Moving down, he grasps my hip as he lies behind me, holding me close.

I stretch out beside him, relishing his touch on me, and feel his erection against my behind. An Edward Cullen wake-up call… oh my.

"You're pleased to see me," I mumble sleepily, squirming suggestively against him.

I can feel his grin against my jaw.

"I'm very pleased to see you," he says softly as his hand moves over my belly… and down. His hand cups my sex and his fingers explore.

"There are definite advantages to waking up beside you, Miss Swan," he teases softly, and gently pulls me around so that I'm lying on my back.

"Sleep well?" he asks as his fingers continue their sensual torture. He's smiling down at me, his dazzling, all-American-drop-dead-male-model-perfect-teeth smile. He takes my breath away. My hips begin to sway to the rhythm of the dance his fingers have begun. He kisses me chastely on the lips and then moves down my neck, nipping slowly, kissing and sucking as he goes. I moan. He's gentle and his touch is light, and it's heavenly. His intrepid fingers move down, and slowly he eases one inside me. I hear the hiss of his breath.

"'Oh, Bella," he murmurs reverentially against my throat. "You're always ready…" He moves his finger in time with his kisses as his lips journey leisurely across my clavicle and then down to my breast. He torments first one, then the other nipple with teeth and lips, but oh so gently, and they tighten and lengthen in sweet response.

I groan.

"Hmmm," he growls softly and raises his head to give me a blazing green-eyed look. "Oh, I want you now," he breathes and reaches over to the bedside table. He shifts on top of me, taking his weight on his elbows, and rubs his nose along mine whilst easing my legs apart with his. He kneels up and rips open the foil packet.

"I can't wait until Saturday," he says his eyes glowing with salacious delight.

"Your birthday?" I pant.

"No. I can stop using these fuckers."

"Aptly named," I giggle.

He smirks at me as he rolls on the condom.

"Are you giggling, Miss Swan?"

"No…" I try and fail to straighten my face.

"Now is not the time for giggling," he shakes his head slightly in admonishment and his voice is low, stern, but his expression – holy cow – glacial and volcanic at once. My breath catches in my throat.

"I thought you liked it when I giggle," I whisper hoarsely, gazing into the dark depths of his emerald eyes.

"Not now. I need to stop you giggling, and I think I know how," he says ominously, and his body covers mine.

"What would you like for breakfast, Bella?"

"I'll just have some granola. Thank you, Mrs. Cope."

I flush as I take my place at the breakfast bar beside Edward. Last time I clapped eyes on the very prim and proper Mrs. Cope, I was being unceremoniously dragged into the bedroom over Edward's shoulder.

"You look lovely," Edward says softly.

I'm wearing my grey pencil skirt and grey silk blouse again.

"So do you," I smile shyly at him. He's wearing a pale blue shirt and jeans, and he looks cool and fresh and perfect as always.

"We should buy you some more skirts," he says matter-of-factly. "In fact, I'd love to take you shopping."

Hmm – shopping. I hate shopping. But with Edward, maybe it won't be so bad. I decide on distraction as the best form of defense.

"I wonder what will happen at work today?"

"They'll have to replace the sleazeball." Edward frowns, scowling as if he's just stepped in something extraordinarily unpleasant.

"I hope they take on a woman as my new boss."

"Why?"

"Well, you're less likely to object to me going away with them," I tease him.

His lips twitch and he starts on his omelet.

"What's so funny?" I ask.

"You are. Eat your granola, all of it, if that's all you're having."

Bossy as ever. I purse my lips at him, but tuck in.

"So, the key goes here." Edward points out the ignition beneath the gearshift.

"Strange place," I mutter. But I am so delighted with every little detail, practically bouncing like a small child in the comfortable leather seat. Edward has finally let me drive my car. He regards me coolly, though his eyes are alight with humor.

"You're quite excited about this, aren't you?" he murmurs, amused.

I nod, grinning like a fool.

"Just smell that new car smell. This is even better than the submissive special… err Volvo." I add quickly, blushing.

Edward's mouth twists.

"Submissive special, eh? You have such a way with words, Miss Swan." He leans back with a faux look of disgust, but he can't fool me. I know he's enjoying himself.

"Well, let's go." He waves his long-fingered hand towards the entrance of the garage.

I clap my hands, and start the car… the engine purrs into life. Putting the gearshift into drive, I ease my foot off the brake and the Saab moves smoothly forward. Taylor starts up the Mercedes behind us and follows us out of the Escala garage on to the street.

"Can we have the radio on?" I ask as we wait at the first stop sign.

"I want you to concentrate," he says sharply.

"Oh, Edward, please, I can drive with music on." I roll my eyes.

He scowls for a moment and then reaches for the radio.

"You can play your iPod and MP3 discs as well as CDs on this," he murmurs.

The dulcet tones of The Police suddenly fill the car… too loud. Edward turns the music down.

-

I guess I'm always hoping that you'll end this reign But it's my destiny to be the King of Pain King of Pain, King of Pain, King of Pain, I'll always be King of Pain

-

"Your anthem," I tease Edward, then instantly regret it when his mouth tightens in a thin line. *Oh no.* I continue hastily, "I have this album… somewhere." Somewhere in that apartment I have spent very little time in. I wonder how Jasper is getting on. I should try and call him today. I won't have much to do at work. Anxiety blooms in my stomach. What will happen when I get to the office? Will everyone know the story about James? Will everyone know of Edward's involvement? Will I still have a job? Sheesh… if I have no job, what will I do? *Marry the gazillionaire, Bella!* My subconscious has her snarky face on. I ignore her – rapacious bitch.

"Hey, Miss Smart Mouth. Come back." Edward drags me into the here and now as I pull up at the next stoplight. "You're very distracted. Concentrate, Bella," he scolds. "Accidents happen when you don't concentrate."

Oh for heaven's sake – and suddenly I'm catapulted back in time to when Charlie was teaching me to drive. I don't need another father. A husband maybe. A kinky husband… hmmm.

"I'm just thinking about work," I offer, conciliatory.

"Baby, you'll be fine. Trust me." Edward smiles kindly.

"Please don't interfere. I want to do this on my own, Edward… please. It's important to me," I say as kindly and softly as I can. I don't want to argue.

His mouth sets once more into a hard mulish line, and I think he's going to berate me again.

Oh no.

"Let's not argue, Edward. We've had such a wonderful morning. And last night was…" Words fail me. Last night was… "Heaven."

He says nothing.

I glance quickly over at him and his eyes are closed.

"Yes. Heaven," he says softly. "I meant what I said."

"What?"

"I don't want to let you go."

"I don't want to go."

He smiles, and it's this new, shy smile, that dissolves everything in its path. Boy, it's powerful.

"Good," he says simply, and he visibly relaxes.

I drive into the parking lot half a block from SIP.

"I'll walk you to work. Taylor will take me from there," Edward offers.

I clamber out of the car, restricted by my pencil skirt, while Edward climbs out gracefully, at ease with his body… or giving the impression of someone at ease with their body. Hmmm, someone who can't bear to be touched can't be that at ease. I frown at my errant thought.

"Don't forget we're seeing Banner this evening – 7:00," he says as he holds his hand out to me.

I press the remote door lock and take his hand.

"I won't forget. I'll compile a list of questions for him."

"Questions? About me?"

I nod.

"I can answer any questions you have about me." Edward looks affronted.

I smile at him.

"Yes, but I want the unbiased expensive charlatan's opinion."

He frowns, and suddenly pulls me into his embrace, holding both my hands tightly behind my back.

"Is this a good idea?" he says, his voice low and husky, and I can see the anxiety in his eyes. It tears at my soul.

"If you don't want me to, I won't." I stare up at him, blinking, and I want to caress the concern out of his face. I tug on one of my hands and he frees it. I touch his cheek tenderly. It's smooth from shaving this morning. "What are you worried about?" I breathe.

"That you'll go."

"Edward, how many times do I have to tell you – I'm not going anywhere. You've already told me the worst. I'm not leaving you."

"Then why haven't you answered me?"

"Answered you?" I murmur disingenuously.

"You know what I'm talking about, Bella."

I sigh.

"I want to know that I'm enough for you, Edward. That's all."

"And you won't take my word for it?" he says, exasperated.

"Edward, this has all been so quick. And by your own admission, you're fifty shades of fucked-up. I can't give you what you need," I mutter. "It's just not for me. But that makes me feel inadequate, especially seeing you with Lauren. Who's to say that one day you won't meet someone who likes doing what you do? And who's to say you won't… you know… fall for her? Someone much better suited to your needs…" The thought of Edward with anyone else sickens me. I stare down at my knotted fingers.

"I knew several women who like doing what I like to do. None of them appealed to me the way you do. I've never had an emotional connection with any of them. It's only ever been you, Bella."

"Because you never gave them a chance. You've spent too long locked up in your fortress, Edward. Look, let's discuss this later. I have to go to work. Maybe Dr. Banner can offer us his insight." This is all far too heavy a discussion for a parking lot at 8:50 in the morning, and Edward, for once, seems to agree. He nods, releasing me, his eyes wary.

"Come," he orders, holding out his hand.

When I reach my desk I find a note asking me to go straight to Victoria's office. My heart leaps into my mouth. Oh, this is it… I am going to get fired.

"Isabella." Victoria smiles kindly, waving me into a chair before her desk.

I sit and gaze at her expectantly, hoping that she can't hear my thumping heart. She smoothes her thick red hair and regards with me with somber, clear blue eyes.

"I have some rather sad news."

Sad! Oh no.

"I've called you in to inform you that James has left the company rather suddenly."

I flush. This isn't sad for me. Should I tell her that I know?

"His rather hasty departure has left a vacancy, and we'd like you to fill it for now, until we find a replacement."

What? I feel the blood rush from my head. This is unexpected.

"But, I've only been here for a week or so."

"Yes, Isabella, I understand… but James was always a champion of your abilities. He had high hopes for you."

I stop breathing. *He had high hopes of getting me on my back, sure*.

"Here's a detailed job description. Have a good look through it and we can discuss later today."

"But…"

"Please, I know this seems fast, but you've already made contact with James' key authors. Your chapter notes haven't gone unnoticed by the other commissioning editors. You have a shrewd mind, Isabella. We all think you can do it."

"Okay…"

"Look, have a think about it. In the meantime, you can take James' office."

She stands, effectively dismissing me, and holds out her hand. I shake it in a complete daze.

"I'm glad he's gone," she whispers and a haunted look crosses her face. Holy shit. What did he do to *her*?

Back at my desk, I grab my BlackBerry and call Edward. He answers on the second ring.

"Isabella. You okay?" he asks, concerned.

"They've just given me James' job," I blurt out.

"You're kidding," he breathes, shocked.

"Did you have anything to do with this?" My voice is sharper than I mean it to be.

"No. No, not at all. I mean, with all due respect, Isabella, you've only been there for a week or so – and I don't mean that unkindly."

"I know." I frown. "Apparently James really rated me."

"Did he now?" Edwards tone is frosty and then he sighs.

"Well baby, if they think you can do it, I'm sure you can. Congratulations. Perhaps we should celebrate after we've seen Banner."

"Hmmm. Are you sure you had nothing to do with this?"

He is silent for a moment and then he says in a low menacing voice.

"Do you doubt me? It angers me that you do."

I swallow. Boy, he gets mad so easily.

"I'm sorry," I breathe, chastened.

"If you need anything, let me know. I'll be here. And, Isabella…"

"What?"

"Use your BlackBerry," he adds tersely.

"Yes, Edward."

He doesn't hang up as I expect him to. I can hear his deep breath.

"I mean it. If you need me, I'm here." His words are much softer, conciliatory. Oh, he's so mercurial; his mood swings like a metronome set at presto.

"Okay," I murmur. "I'd better go. I have to move offices."

"If you need me. I mean it," he murmurs.

"I know. Thank you, Edward. I love you."

I can hear his grin at the other end of the phone. I've won him back.

"I love you too, baby."

Oh, will I ever tire of him saying those words to me?

"I'll talk to you later."

"Laters, baby."

I hang up and glance at James' office. My office. Holy crow… Isabella Swan, Acting Commissioning Editor. Who would have thought? *I should ask for more money.* What would James think if he knew? I shudder at the thought, and wonder idly how he's spent his morning. Not in New York as he expected. I stroll into his – my office, sit down at the desk, and start reading the job description.

At 12:30, Victoria buzzes me.

"Bella, we need you in a meeting 1:00 in the boardroom. Jerry Roach and Kay Bestie will be there – you know, the company President and Vice President? All the commissioning editors will be attending."

Shit!

"Do I need to prepare anything?"

"No, this is just an informal we do once a month. Lunch will be provided."

"I'll be there."

Holy shit! I check through the current roster of James' authors… Yes, I've pretty much got those nailed. I have the five manuscripts he's championing, plus two more, which should really be considered for publication. I take a deep breath. I cannot believe it's lunchtime already. The day has flown by, and I'm loving it. There has been so much to absorb this morning. A ping from my calendar announces an appointment.

Oh no – Alice! In all the excitement, I have forgotten about our lunch. I fish out my BlackBerry and try frantically to find her phone number.

My phone buzzes.

"It's him… in reception." Claire's voice is hushed.

"Who?" For a moment I think it might be Edward.

"The blond god."

"Jasper."

Oh. What does he want? I immediately feel guilty for not having called him.

Jasper, dressed in a checked blue shirt, white tee, and jeans, beams at me when I appear.

"Wow! You look hot, Swan," he says, nodding appreciatively. He gives me a quick hug.

"Is everything okay?" My first question. Jeez, I sound like Edward.

He frowns.

"Everything's fine, Bella. I just wanted to see you. I've not heard from you in a while, and I wanted to check how Mr. Mogul was treating you."

I flush, and can't help my smile.

"Okay!" Jasper exclaims, holding up his hands. "I can tell by the secret smile… I don't want to know any more. I came by on the off-chance you could do lunch. I'm enrolling at Seattle for psych courses in September. For my master's."

"Oh, Jasper. So much has happened. I have a ton to tell you, but right now I can't. I have a meeting." An idea hits me hard. "And I wonder if you can do me a really, really, really big favor?" I clasp my hands together in supplication.

"Sure," he says, bemused by my pleading.

"I'm supposed to be having lunch with Edward and Emmett's sister, but I can't get ahold of her, and this meeting's just been sprung on me. Please will you take her for lunch? Please?"

"Aw, Bella! I don't want to babysit some brat."

"Please, Jasper." I give him the biggest-brownest-longest-eye-lashed look that I can manage.

He rolls his eyes at me and I know I've got him.

"You'll cook me something?" he mutters.

"Sure, whatever, whenever."

"So where is she?"

"She's due here now."

And as if on cue, I hear her voice.

"Bella!" she calls from the front door.

We both turn, and there she is – all long-legged and spiky dark hair, in a very short mint green mini-dress and matching high-heeled pumps, with straps around her slim ankles. She looks stunning.

"The brat?" he whispers – and he's gaping at her.

"Yes. The brat that needs babysitting," I whisper back. "Hi Alice," I give her a quick hug as she stares, rather too blatantly, at Jasper.

"Alice, this is Jasper, Rose's brother."

He nods, his eyes darkening as he gazes at her. *Oh!*

She blinks several times as she gives him her hand.

"Delighted to meet you," Jasper murmurs smoothly and Alice blinks again, silent for once.

Holy cow! Suddenly I feel I am intruding. *Huh?*

"I can't make lunch," I say lamely. *They can't take their eyes off each other.* When Alice turns to me she looks… dazzled. I know that look. I suffer from that look, often.

"Jasper has agreed to take you, if that's okay? Can we have a raincheck?"

"Sure," she says quietly. Alice quiet… this is novel.

"Yeah," Jasper says absentmindedly. "I'll take it from here. Laters, Bella."

He offers Alice his arm, which she takes with a shy smile.

"Bye, Bella," Alice turns to me, and mouths 'Oh my God' giving me a large, exaggerated wink.

Oh my. Jasper and Alice. I wave at them as they leave the building, and I'm slightly stunned. I wonder what Edward how is going to feel about this? The thought makes me uneasy. Well, she's my age, so he can't object too much. *This is Edward we're dealing with!* My snarky subconscious is back, hatchet-mouthed, cardigan and purse in the crook of her arm. I shake off the image. Alice is a grown woman, and Edward needs to grow up. There, problem solved. Oh, if only it were that easy. I head back to James' – err, my office, to prep for the meeting.

It's 3:30 when I return. The meeting went well. I have even secured approval to progress the two manuscripts I was championing… it's a heady feeling.

On my desk is an enormous wicker basket crammed with stunning white and pale pink roses. Wow, the fragrance alone is heavenly. I smile as I pick up the card. I know who they're from.

-

Congratulations Miss Swan.
And all on your own! No help from your over-friendly
neighborhood megalomaniac CEO.
Love
Edward

-

I pick up my BlackBerry to email him.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Megalomaniacs
Date: 18 June 2009: 15.43
To: Edward Cullen

Thank you for the beautiful flowers. And the wicker basket.
It's almost big enough to sleep in. Perhaps we should go on a picnic with it and fill it with goodies once the flowers have gone.

x

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Fresh Air
Date: 18 June 2009 15.55
To: Isabella Swan

Picnic, eh? There's a lot we can do in the great outdoors, Isabella. I look forward to showing you…
How is your day going, baby?

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

Oh my. I flush, reading his response.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Hectic
Date: 18 June 2009: 16.00
To: Edward Cullen

The day has flown by. I have hardly had a moment to myself to think… about anything other than work. I think I can do this!
I'll tell you more when I'm home.
Outdoors sounds… interesting.

Love you.

Bx

-

My phone buzzes. It's Claire from reception, desperate to know who sent the flowers, and what happened to James. Holed up in the office all day, I have missed the gossip. I tell her quickly that the flowers are from my boyfriend and that I know very little about James's departure. My BlackBerry buzzes. Another email from Edward.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: I can take a hint.
Date: 18 June 2009 16.09
To: Isabella Swan

Laters, baby. x

Edward Cullen,
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

-

At five-thirty I pack up my desk. I can't believe how quickly the day has gone. I have to get back to Escala and prepare to meet Dr. Banner. I haven't even had time to think of questions. Perhaps this can just be an initial meeting, and maybe Edward will let me see him again. I shrug off the thought as I dash out of the office, waving a quick goodbye to Claire. I've also got Edward's birthday to think about. I know what I'm going to give him. I'd like him to have it tonight, before we meet Banner, but how? Beside the parking lot is a small store selling touristy trinkets. Inspiration hits me and I duck inside.

Edward, on his BlackBerry, stands staring out of the glass wall as I enter the great room half an hour later. Turning, he beams at me and wraps up his call.

"Kate, that's great. Tell Barney and we'll go from there…. Goodbye."

He strides over to me as I stand shyly in the entryway. He's changed now, into a white tee and jeans, all bad boy and smoldering… Whoa. Will he always have this effect on me?

"Good evening, Miss Swan," he murmurs and he bends to kiss me. "Congratulations on your promotion." He wraps his arms around me. He smells yummy.

"You've showered."

"I've just had a workout with Laurent."

"Oh…"

"Managed to knock him on his ass twice." Edward beams, boyish and pleased with himself. His grin is infectious.

"That doesn't happen often?"

"No. Very satisfying when it does. Hungry?"

I shake my head.

"What?" He frowns at me.

"I'm nervous. About Dr. Banner."

"Me too. How was your day?"

He releases me, and I give a quick précis. He listens attentively.

"Oh, there's one more thing I should tell you," I add. "I was supposed to have lunch with Alice."

He raises his eyebrows, surprised.

"You never mentioned that."

"I know, but I forgot. I couldn't make it, because of the meeting, and Jasper took her out to lunch instead. They seemed to… hit it off."

His face darkens slightly.

"I see. Stop biting your lip."

"I'm going to change," I say quickly, turning to leave before he can react any further.

Dr. Banner's office is a short drive from Edward's apartment. Very handy, I muse, for emergency sessions.

"I usually run here from home," Edward says as he parks my Saab. "This is a great car."

He smiles at me.

"I think so too." I smile back at him. "Edward… I..."

I gaze anxiously at him.

"What is it, Bella?"

"Here." I pull the small black gift box from my purse. "This is for you, for your birthday. I wanted to give it to you now, but only if you promise not to open it until Saturday, okay?"

He blinks at me in surprise and swallows.

"Okay," he murmurs cautiously.

Taking a deep breath, I hand it to him and he gives me a puzzled, bemused expression.

He shakes the box. It rattles very satisfactorily, and he frowns. I can see how desperate he is to know what it contains. Then he grins, his eyes alight with youthful, carefree excitement. Oh boy… he looks his age, and so beautiful.

"You can't open it until Saturday," I warn him.

"I get it," he says. "Why are you giving this to me now?" He pops the box into the inside pocket of his blue-striped blazer… *close to his heart*. How apt, I muse.

I smirk at him.

"Because I can, Mr. Cullen."

His mouth twists with wry amusement.

"Why, Miss Swan… you stole my line."

We are ushered into Dr. Banner's palatial office by a brisk and friendly receptionist. She greets Edward warmly… a little too warmly for my taste. Jeez, she's old enough to be his mother, and he knows her name. The room is understated – pale green, with two dark green

couches facing two leather winged chairs – and has the atmosphere of a gentlemen's club. Dr. Banner is seated at a desk at the far end of the room. As we enter, he stands and walks over to join us in the seating area. He wears black pants and a grey open-necked shirt – no tie. His bright blue eyes seem to miss nothing.

"Edward," he smiles amicably.

"John," Edward replies and they shake hands. "You remember Isabella?"

"How could I forget? Isabella, welcome."

"Bella, please," I mumble as he shakes my hand firmly. Oh, I do love his English accent.

"Bella," he says kindly, ushering us towards the couches. Edward gestures to one of them for me. I sit, and he sprawls on the other beside me so that we're at right angles to each other. A small table with a simple lamp is between us. I note with interest a box of tissues beside the lamp.

This isn't what I expected. I had in my mind's eye a stark white room with a black leather chaise longue. My inner goddess might have felt more at home then.

Dr. Banner takes a seat in one of the winged chairs and picks up a leather notepad, looking relaxed and in control. Edward crosses his legs, his ankle resting on his knee, and stretches his arms along the back of the couches. Finding my hand, he gives it a gentle squeeze.

"Edward has requested that you accompany him to one of our sessions," Dr. Banner begins gently. "Just so you know, we treat these sessions with absolute confidentiality."

I raise my eyebrow at Banner, halting him mid-speech.

"Oh – err… I have signed an NDA," I murmur, embarrassed that he's stopped.

Both Banner and Edward stare at me, and Edward releases my hand.

"A non-disclosure agreement?" Dr. Banner's brow furrows slightly and he glances quizzically at Edward.

Edward shrugs.

"You start all your relationships with women with an NDA?" Dr. Banner asks Edward.

"The contractual ones, I do."

Dr. Banner's lip twitches slightly.

"You've had others?" he asks and he looks amused.

"No," Edward answers after a beat, and he looks amused too.

"As I thought."

Dr. Banner turns his attention back to me.

"Well, I guess we don't have to worry about confidentiality, but may I suggest that the two of you discuss this at some point? As I understand, you're no longer entering into that kind of contractual relationship."

"Different kind of contract, hopefully," says Edward softly, glancing at me.

I flush and Dr. Banner narrows his eyes slightly.

"Bella. You'll have to forgive me, but I probably know a lot more about you than you think. Edward has been very forthcoming."

I glance nervously at Edward. *What has he said?*

"An NDA?" he continues. "That must have shocked you."

I blink at him.

"Oh, I think the shock of that has paled into insignificance, given Edward's most recent revelations," I answer, my voice soft and hesitant. *I sound so nervous.*

"I'm sure." Dr. Banner smiles kindly at me. "So, Edward, what would you like to discuss?"

Edward shrugs, like a surly teen.

"Isabella wanted to see you. Perhaps you should ask her."

Dr. Banner's eyebrows lift very slightly and he gazes shrewdly at me.

Holy crow. My throat dries. This is just mortifying.

"Would you be more comfortable if Edward left us for a while?"

My eyes dart to Edward and he's gazing at me expectantly.

"Yes," I whisper.

Edward frowns and opens his mouth, but closes it again quickly, and stands in one swift graceful movement.

"I'll be in the waiting room," he says, his mouth a flat grumpy line.

Oh no.

"Thank you, Edward," Dr. Banner says impassively.

Edward gives me one long, searching look, then stalks out of the room, but he doesn't slam the door… Phew. I immediately relax.

"He intimidates you?"

"Yes. But not as much as he used to." I feel disloyal, but it's the truth.

"That doesn't surprise me, Bella. What can I help you with?"

I stare down at my knotted fingers. What can I ask?

"Dr. Banner… I've never been in a relationship before, and Edward is… well, he's Edward. And over the last week or so, a great deal has happened. I haven't had a chance to think things through."

"What do you need to think through?"

I glance up at him, and his head is cocked to one side, gazing at me… with compassion, I think.

"Well, Edward tells me that he's happy to give up… errr –" I stumble and pause. This is so much more difficult to discuss than I'd imagined.

Dr. Banner sighs.

"Bella, in the very limited time that you've known him, you've made more progress with my patient than I have in the last two years. You have had a profound effect on him. You must see that."

"He's had a profound effect on me, too. I just don't know if I'm… enough. To fulfill his needs," I whisper.

"Is that what you need from me? Reassurance?"

I nod.

"Needs change," he says simply. "Edward has found himself in a situation where his methods of coping are no longer effective. Very simply, you've forced him to confront some of his demons, and rethink."

I blink at him. This echoes what Edward has told me.

"Yes, his demons," I murmur.

"We don't dwell on them – they're in the past. Edward knows what his demons are, as do I, and now I'm sure you do, too. I'm much more concerned with the future and getting Edward to a place where he wants to be."

I frown and he raises an eyebrow.

"The technical term is SFBT. Sorry," he smiles, "that stands for Solution Focused Brief Therapy. Essentially, it's goal-oriented. We concentrate on where Edward wants to be and how to get him there. It's a dialectical approach. There's no point in breast-beating about the past – all that's been picked over by every physician, psychologist, and psychiatrist Edward's ever seen. It's the future that's important, where Edward envisages himself, where he wants to be. It took you walking out on him to make him take this form of therapy seriously. He's realizes that his goal is a loving relationship with you. It's that simple, and that's what we're working on now. Of course there are obstacles… his haphephobia for one."

Oh jeez… his what? I gasp.

"I mean, his fear of being touched," Dr. Banner says gently. "Which I'm sure you're aware of."

I flush, and nod.

"He has a morbid self-abhorrence. I'm sure that comes as no surprise to you. And of course there's the parasomnia. Em, night terrors, to the layperson."

I blink at him, trying to absorb all these long words. I know about all of this. But Banner hasn't mentioned my central concern.

"But he's a sadist. Surely, as such, he has needs which I can't fulfill."

Dr. Banner actually rolls his eyes and his mouth presses into a hard line.

"That's no longer recognized as a psychiatric term. I don't know how many times I have told him that. It's not even classified as a paraphilia any more, not since the Nineties."

Dr. Banner has lost me again. I blink at him. He smiles kindly at me.

"This is a pet peeve of mine." He shakes his head. "Edward just thinks the worst of any given situation. It's part of his self-abhorrence. Of course there's such a thing as sexual sadism. But it's not a disease, it's a lifestyle choice, and if it's practiced in a safe, sane relationship between consenting adults then it's a non-issue. My understanding is that Edward has conducted all of his BDSM relationships in this manner. You're the first lover who hasn't consented, so he's not willing to do it."

Lover!

"But surely it's not that simple."

"Why not?" Dr. Banner shrugs good-naturedly.

"Well… the reasons he does it."

"Bella, that's the point. In terms of solution-focused therapy, it *is* that simple. Edward wants to be with you. In order to do that, he needs to forego the more extreme aspects of that kind of relationship. After all, what you're asking for is not unreasonable… is it?"

I flush. No, it's not unreasonable... is it?

"I don't think so. But I worry that he does."

"Edward recognizes that and has acted accordingly. He's not insane."

Dr. Banner sighs.

"In a nutshell, he's not a sadist, Bella. He's an angry, frightened, brilliant young man, who was dealt a shit hand of cards when he was born. We can all beat our breasts about it, and analyze the who, the how, and the why to death – or Edward can move on and decide how he wants to live. He'd found something that worked for him for a few years, more or less, but since he met you, it no longer works. And, as a consequence, he's changing his modus operandi. You and I have to respect his choice and support him in it."

I gape at him.

"That's my reassurance?"

"As good as it gets, Bella. There are no guarantees in this life." He smiles. "And that is my professional opinion."

I smile too, weakly. Doctor jokes… jeez.

"But he thinks of himself as a recovering alcoholic."

"Edward will always think the worst of himself. As I said, it's part of his self-abhorrence. It's in his make-up, no matter what. Naturally he's anxious about making this change in his life. Potentially exposing himself to a whole world of emotional pain – which, incidentally, he had a taste of when you left him. Naturally he's apprehensive."

Dr. Banner pauses.

"I don't mean to stress how important a role you have in his Damascene conversion – his road to Damascus. But you have. Edward would not be in this place if he had not met you. Personally, I don't think that the alcoholic is a very good analogy, but if it works for him for now, then I think we should give him the benefit of the doubt."

Give Edward the benefit of the doubt… I frown at the thought.

"Emotionally, Edward is an adolescent, Bella. He bypassed that phase in his life totally. He's channeled all his energies into succeeding in the business world, and he has, beyond all expectations. His emotional world… has to play catch-up."

"So how do I help?"

Dr. Banner laughs.

"Just keep doing what you're doing." He grins at me. "Edward is head over heels. It's a delight to see."

I flush, and my inner goddess is hugging herself with glee, but something bothers me.

"Can I ask you one more thing?"

"Of course."

I take a deep breath.

"Part of me thinks that if he wasn't this broken he wouldn't… want me."

Dr. Banner's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"That's a very negative thing to say about yourself, Bella. And frankly, it says more about you than it does about Edward. It's not quite up there with his self-loathing… but I'm surprised by it."

"Well, look at him… and then look at me."

Dr. Banner frowns.

"I have. I see an attractive young man and I see an attractive young woman. Bella, why don't you think of yourself as attractive?"

Oh no… I don't want this to be about me. I stare down at my fingers.

There's a sharp knock on the door that makes me jump. Edward comes back into the room, glaring at both of us.

I flush and glance quickly at Banner, who is smiling benignly at Edward.

"Welcome back, Edward," he says kindly.

"I think time is up, John."

"Nearly, Edward. Join us."

Edward sits down, beside me this time, and places his hand possessively on my knee. His action does not go unnoticed by Dr. Banner.

"Did you have any other questions, Bella?" Dr. Banner asks, and I can see the concern on his face. Shit, I should not have asked that question.

I shake my head.

"Edward?"

"Not today, John."

Banner nods.

"It may be beneficial if you both come again. I'm sure Bella will have more questions."

Edward nods, reluctantly.

I flush… shit. He wants to delve. Edward clasps my hand and regards me intently.

"Okay?" he asks softly.

I smile at him, nodding. Yes, we're going for the benefit of the doubt, courtesy of the good doctor from England.

Edward squeezes my hand and turns to Banner.

"How is she?" he asks softly.

Me?

"She'll get there," he says reassuringly.

"Good. Keep me updated of her progress."

"I will."

Oh… they're talking about Lauren. *Holy fuck!*

"Shall we go and celebrate your promotion?" Edward asks me pointedly.

I nod shyly as Edward stands.

We say our quick goodbyes to Dr. Banner and Edward ushers me out with unseemly haste. In the street, he turns to me.

"How was that?" His voice is anxious.

"It was good."

He's regarding me suspiciously. I cock my head to one side.

"Mr. Cullen, please don't look at me that way. Under doctor's orders, I am going to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"What does that mean?"

"You'll see."

His mouth twists slightly and his eyes narrow.

"Get in the car," he orders while opening the passenger door.

Oh… change of direction.

"Where are we going?'

Edward smirks at me.

"You'll see.

Chapter 82

As Edward opens the passenger door of the Saab my BlackBerry buzzes. I haul it out of my purse.

Shit… Jake!

"Hi!"

"Bella, hi…"

I stare at Fifty, who is eyeing me suspiciously. 'Jake,' I mouth at him. He stares impassively at me, but his eyes harden. Does he think I don't notice? I turn my attention back to Jake.

"Sorry I haven't called you. Is it about tomorrow?" I ask Jake, but stare up at Edward.

"Yeah, listen, I spoke with some guy at Cullen's place, so I know where I'm delivering the photos, and I should get there between five and six. After that, I'm free."

Oh.

"Well, I'm actually staying with Edward at the moment, and if you want to, he says you can stay at his place."

Edward presses his mouth in a hard line. *Hmmm – some host he is.*

Jake is silent for a moment, absorbing this news. I cringe. I haven't really had a chance to talk to him about Edward.

"Okay," he says eventually. "This thing with Cullen, it's serious?"

I turn away from the car and pace to the other side of the sidewalk.

"Yes."

"How serious?"

I roll my eyes and pause. Why does Edward have to be listening?

"Serious."

"Is he with you now? That why you're being so short?"

"Yes."

"Okay. So are you allowed out tomorrow?"

"Of course I am." *I hope.* I automatically cross my fingers.

"So where shall I meet you?"

"You could collect me from work," I offer.

"Okay."

"I'll text you the address."

"What time?"

"Say 6:00?"

"Sure. I'll see you then, Bella. Looking forward to it. I miss you."

I grin.

"Cool. I'll see you then."

I switch the phone off and turn. Edward is leaning against the car watching me carefully, his expression impossible to read.

"How's your friend?" he asks coolly.

"He's well. He'll pick me up from work and I think we'll go for a drink. Would you like to join us?"

Edward hesitates, regarding me speculatively.

"You don't think he'll try anything?"

"No!" My tone is exasperated, but I refrain from rolling my eyes.

"Okay." Edward holds his hands up in defeat. "You hang out with your friend, and I'll see you later in the evening."

I was expecting a fight, and his easy acquiescence throws me off balance.

"See? I can be reasonable," he smirks.

My mouth twists. *We'll see about that.*

"Can I drive?"

Edward blinks at me, surprised by my request.

"I'd rather you didn't."

"Why, exactly?"

"Because I don't like to be driven."

"You seem to tolerate Taylor driving you."

"I trust Taylor's driving implicitly."

"And not mine?" I put my hands on my hips. "Honestly, your control-freakery knows no bounds. I've been driving since I was 15."

He shrugs in response, as if this is of no consequence whatsoever.

Oh, he's so exasperating! Benefit of the doubt? Well, screw that.

"Is this my car?" I demand.

He frowns at me.

"Of course it's your car."

"Then give me the keys, please. I've driven it twice, and then only to and from work. Now you're having all the fun." I am in full-on pout mode.
Edward's lips twitch with a repressed smile.

"But you don't know where we're going."

"Well, I'm sure you can enlighten me, Mr. Cullen. You've done a great job of it so far."

He gazes at me, then smiles. This new, shy smile that totally disarms me and takes my breath away.

"Great job, eh?" he murmurs.

I blush.

"Mostly, yes."

"Well, in that case…" He hands me the keys, walks around to the driver's door, and opens it for me.

-

"Left here," Edward orders, and we head North towards the I-5. "Hell – gently, Bella." He grabs ahold of the dashboard.

Oh, for heaven's sake. I roll my eyes, but don't turn to look at him. Van Morrison croons in the background.

-

I've been searching a long time

For someone exactly like you

I've been traveling all around the world

Waiting for you to come through.

-

"What did Banner say?" Edward asks softly, and I can hear his anxiety leaching into his voice.

"I told you. He says I should give you the benefit of the doubt."

Damn, maybe I should have let Edward drive. Then I could watch him. In fact… I indicate to pull over.

"What are you doing?" he snaps, alarmed.

"Letting you drive."

"Why?"

"So I can look at you."

He laughs.

"No, no – you wanted to drive. So, you drive, and I'll look at you."

I scowl at him.

"Keep your eyes on the road!" he shouts.

My blood boils. *Right!*

-

I've been traveling a hard road

Baby looking for someone exactly like you

I've been carrying my heavy load

Waiting for the light to come Shining through.

-

I pull up at the curb just before a stoplight and storm out of the car, slamming the door. Stand on the sidewalk, arms folded, I glare at him.

He climbs out of the car.

"What are you doing?" he asks angrily, staring down at me.

"No. What are *you* doing?"

"You can't park here."

"I know that."

"So why have you?"

"Because I've had it with you barking orders. Either you drive, or you shut up about my driving!"

"Isabella, get back in the car before we get a ticket."

"No."

He blinks at me, at a total loss, and runs his hands through his hair, and his anger becomes bewilderment. He looks so comical all of a sudden… I can't help but smile at him. He frowns.

"What?" he snaps once more.

"You."

"Oh, Isabella! You are the most frustrating female on the planet." He throws his hands in the air. "Fine, I'll drive." I grab the edges of his jacket and pull him to me.

"No, *you* are the most frustrating man on the planet, Mr. Cullen."

He gazes down at me, his eyes dark and intense, and he snakes his arms around my waist, embracing me, holding me close.

"Maybe we're meant for each other, then," he says softly, and inhales deeply, his nose in my hair. I wrap my arms around him and close my eyes. For the first time since this morning, I feel myself relax.

"Oh… Bella, Bella, Bella," he breathes, his lips pressed against my hair. I tighten my arms around him and we stand, immobile, enjoying a moment of unexpected tranquility, on the street. Releasing me, he opens the passenger door. I climb in and sit quietly, watching him walk around the car.

-

But just lately I have realized

Baby the best is yet to come.

Someone like you makes it all worthwhile

Someone like you

Keeps me satisfied.

Someone exactly like you.

-

Restarting the car, Edward pulls out into the traffic, absentmindedly humming along to Van Morrison. Whoa… I've never heard him sing, not even in the shower, ever. I frown. He has a lovely voice, of course. Hmmm… has he heard *me* sing? *He wouldn't be asking you to*

marry him if he had! My subconscious has her arms crossed, and is wearing Burberry check… jeez. The song finishes, and Edward smirks.

"You know, if we had gotten a ticket, title of this car is in your name."

"Well, good thing I've been promoted – I can afford the fine," I say smugly, staring at his lovely profile. His lips twitch slightly. Another Van Morrison song starts playing as he takes the on-ramp to I-5, heading north.

"Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise. What else did Banner say?"

I sigh.

"He talked about FFFSTB or something."

"SFBT. The latest therapy option," he mutters.

"You've tried others?"

Edward snorts.

"Baby, I've been subjected to them all. Cognitivism, Freud, functionalism, Gestalt, behaviorism… You name it, over the years I've done it," he says and his voice betrays his bitterness.

The rancor in his voice is distressing.

"Do you think this latest approach will help?"

"What did Banner say?"

"He said not to dwell on your past. Focus on the future, on where you want to be."

Edward nods but shrugs at the same time, his expression cautious.

"What else?" he persists.

"He talked about your fear of being touched, although he called it something else. And about your… nightmares, and your self-abhorrence." I glance at him, and in the evening light he's pensive, chewing at his thumbnail as he drives. He glances quickly at me.

"Eyes on the road, Mr. Cullen." I admonish, my eyebrow cocked at him.

He looks amused, and slightly exasperated.

"You were talking forever, Isabella. What else did he say?"

I swallow.

"He doesn't think you're a sadist," I whisper.

"Really?" Edward says quietly and frowns. The atmosphere in the car takes a nose dive.

"He says that term's not recognized in psychiatry. Not since the nineties," I mutter quickly trying to rescue the mood between us.

Edward's face darkens, and he exhales… slowly.

"Banner and I have differing opinions on this," he says quietly.

"He said you always think the worst of yourself. I know that's true," I murmur. "He also mentioned sexual sadism, but he said that was a lifestyle choice, not a psychiatric condition. Maybe that's what you're thinking about."

His green eyes flash toward me again and his mouth sets in a grim line.

"So, one talk with the good doctor and you're an expert," he says acidly, and turns his eyes front.

Oh dear… I sigh.

"Look, if you don't want to hear what he said, don't ask me," I mutter softly. I don't want to argue. Anyway, he's right – what the hell do I know about all his shit? Do I even want to know? I can list the salient points – his control freakery, his possessiveness, his jealousy, his over-protectiveness – and I completely understand where he's coming from. I can even understand why he doesn't like to be touched – I've seen the physical scars. I can only imagine the mental ones and from all that stem his nightmares. And Dr. Banner said…

"I want to know." Edward interrupts my thoughts as he heads off I-5 at exit 172, heading west towards the slowly, sinking sun.

"He called me your lover."

"Did he now?" his tone is conciliatory. "Well, he's nothing if not fastidious about his terms. I think that's an accurate description. Don't you?"

"Did you think of your subs as lovers?"

Edward's brow creases once more, but this time he's thinking. He turns the Saab smoothly north once again. *Where are we going?*

"No. They were sexual partners," he murmurs, his voice cautious again. "You're my only lover. And I want you to be more."

Oh… there's that magical word again, brimming with possibility. It makes me smile, and inside I hug myself, my inner goddess radiating joy.

"I know," I whisper, trying hard to hide my excitement. "I just need some time, Edward. To get my head around these last few days." He glances at me oddly, perplexed, his head cocked to one side.

After a beat, the stoplight we're stationed at turns green. He nods, and turns the music up. *Hmm… discussion over*. Van Morrison is still singing, more optimistically now, about it being a marvelous night for a moondance. I gaze out of the windows at the pines and spruces dusted gold by the fading light of the sun, their long shadows stretching across the road. Edward has turned into a more residential street and we're heading west towards the Sound.

"Where are we going?" I ask again as we turn into a road. I catch a road sign – 9th Ave NW. I am baffled.

"Surprise," he says quietly, and smiles mysteriously.

There are single-story clapperboard houses, kids clustered around a basketball hoop in their yard… it all looks affluent and wholesome, the houses nestling amongst the trees. Perhaps we're going to visit someone? Who?

A few minutes later, Edward suddenly turns left, and we're confronted by two ornate white metal gates set in a six foot high sandstone wall. Edward presses a button on his door handle and the electric window hums quietly down into the doorframe. Stretching out his hand he punches a number into the keypad, and the gates swing open in welcome.

He glances at me, and his expression has changed. He looks… uncertain, nervous even.

"What is it?" I ask and I can't mask the concern in my voice.

"An idea," he says quietly, and gently steps on the gas.

We head up a tree-lined lane just wide enough for two cars. On one side, the trees ring a densely wooded area, and on the other lies a vast area of grassland, where a once-cultivated field has been left fallow. Grasses and wildflowers have reclaimed it, creating a rural idyll – a meadow, where the late evening breeze softly ripples through the grass… *oh…my*. It's

lovely, the evening sun gilding the wildflowers. Utterly tranquil, and I suddenly imagine myself lying in the grass and gazing up at a clear blue summer sky. The thought is tantalizing, yet makes me feel homesick for some strange reason. How odd.

The lane curves around and opens into a sweeping driveway in front of an impressive Mediterranean-style house of soft pink sandstone. It's palatial. All the lights are on, each window brightly illuminated in the dusk. There's a smart black BMW parked in front of the 4-car garage, but Edward pulls up outside the grand portico. Hmmm… I wonder who we're visiting?

Edward glances anxiously down at me as he switches off the car engine.

"Will you keep an open mind?" he asks.

I feel the furrow in my brow.

"Edward, I've needed an open mind since the day I met you."

He smiles ironically and nods.

"Fair point. Well made, Miss Swan. Let's go."

The dark wood doors open and a woman with sandy blond hair, a dazzling smile, and a sharp grey suit stands waiting. I am grateful I changed into my new navy shift dress to impress Dr. Banner. Okay, I'm not wearing killer heels like her, but still, I'm not in jeans.

"Mr. Cullen." She smiles warmly and they shake hands.

"Miss Kelly," he says politely.

She smiles at me and holds out her hand, which I take. Her isn't-he-dreamily-gorgeous-wish-he-was-mine flush does not go unnoticed.

"Olga Kelly," she announces breezily.

"Bella Swan," I mutter back at her. *Who is this woman?* She stands aside, welcoming us into the house. It's a shock when I step in – the place is empty… completely empty. We find ourselves in a large entrance hall. The walls are a faded primrose yellow, with scuff marks where pictures must have hung once. The light fittings have been removed. The floors are dull hardwood. There are closed doors to either side of us, but Edward gives me no time to assimilate what's happening.

"Come," he says, and taking my hand leads me through the archway in front of us, into a larger inner vestibule. It's dominated by a curved sweeping staircase with an intricate iron

balustrade, but still he doesn't stop. He takes me on through to the main living area, which is empty, save for a large faded gold rug – the biggest rug I have ever seen. Oh, there are four chandeliers still hanging… But Edward's intention is now clear, as we head across the room and outside through open French doors, to a large stone terrace. Below and before us there's half a football field of manicured lawn, but beyond that is the view… *Wow.*

The panoramic, uninterrupted vista is literally breathtaking – staggering, even. Twilight over the Sound… *oh my.* In the distance lies Bainbridge Island, and further still, on this crystal clear evening, the setting sun sinks slowly, glowing blood and flame orange, beyond Olympic National Park. Vermillion hues bleed into the sky – opals, aquamarines, ceruleans – melding with the darker purples of the scant wispy clouds, and the land beyond the Sound. It is nature's best, a visual symphony orchestrated in the sky and reflected in the deep, still waters of the Sound. I am lost to the view… staring… trying to absorb such beauty. I realize I am holding my breath, and Edward is still holding my hand. As I reluctantly turn my eyes away from the view, he's gazing anxiously at me.

"You brought me here to admire the view?" I whisper, awed.

He nods, his expression serious.

"It's… staggering, Edward. Thank you," I murmur, letting my eyes feast on it once more. He releases my hand.

"How would you like to look at it for the rest of your life?" he breathes.

What?

My face whips back to his, startled brown eyes to pensive green. I think my mouth drops open. I gape at him blankly.

"I've always wanted to live on the coast. I sail up and down the Sound coveting these houses. This place hasn't been on the market long. I want to buy it, demolish it, and build a new house – for us," he whispers, and his eyes glow, translucent with his hopes and dreams…

Holy cow. Somehow, I remain upright. I am reeling. *Live, here! In this beautiful haven!*

"It's just an idea," he adds, cautiously.

I glance back to assess the interior of the house. How much is it worth? It must be, what – four, five million dollars? I have no idea. *Holy shit.*

"Why do you want to demolish it?" I ask, looking back at him.

His face falls slightly. *Oh no*.

"I'd like to make a more sustainable home, using the latest ecological techniques. Emmett could build it."

I gaze back at the room again. Miss Olga Kelly is on the far side, hovering by the entrance. She's the realtor… of course. The room is huge, and double height, I notice, a little like the great room at Escala. There's a balcony above – that must be the landing on the second floor. There's a huge fireplace and a whole line of French doors opening on to the terrace. It has an old-world charm.

"Can we look around the house?"

He blinks at me.

"Sure," he shrugs, puzzled.

Miss Kelly's face lights up like Christmas when we head back in. She's delighted to take us on a tour and gives us the spiel.

The house is enormous. 12,000 square feet on six acres of land! As well as this main living room, there's the eat-in – no, banquet-in – kitchen with family den attached (family!). A music room, a library, a study, and, much to my amazement, an indoor pool and exercise suite with sauna and steam room attached. Downstairs in the basement there's a cinema… jeez… and games room. *Hmmm,* what sort of games could we play in here?

Miss Kelly points out all sorts of features, but basically the house is beautiful, and obviously at one time was a happy family home. It's a little shabby now, but nothing that some TLC couldn't cure, surely.

As we follow Miss Kelly up the magnificent main stairs to the second floor, I can hardly contain my excitement. This house has everything I could ever wish for in a home.

"Couldn't you make the existing house more ecological and self-sustaining?"

Edward blinks at me, non-plussed.

"I'd have to ask Emmett. He's the expert in all this."

We are shown into the master suite. Full height windows lead on to a balcony, and the view is still spectacular. I could sit in bed and gaze out all day, watching the sailing boats and the changing weather.

There are five further bedrooms on this floor. *Jeez – kids.* I push the thought hastily to one side. I have too much to process already. Miss Kelly is busily suggesting to Edward how the grounds could accommodate riding stables and a paddock. Horses!!! Terrifying images of my few riding lessons flash through my mind, but Edward doesn't appear to be listening.

"The paddock would be where the meadow is at the moment?"

"Yes," Miss Kelly says brightly.

Hmmm… the meadow looks like somewhere to lie in the long grass and have picnics, not for some four-legged friend of Satan to roam.

-

Back in the main room, Miss Kelly discreetly disappears and Edward leads me out once more on to the terrace. The sun has set, and lights from the towns on the Olympic peninsula are twinkling on the far side of the Sound.

Edward pulls me into his arms and tips my chin up with his index finger, staring intently down at me.

"Lot to take in?" he asks, his expression unreadable.

I nod.

"I wanted to check you liked it before I bought it."

"The view?"

He nods.

"I love the view… and I like the house that's here."

"Really?"

I smile shyly at him.

"Edward, you had me at the meadow."

His lips part as he inhales sharply and then his face transforms with a grin and his hands are suddenly fisting into my hair and his mouth is on mine.

Back in the car, as we head for Seattle, Edward's mood has lifted considerably.

"So you're going to buy it?" I ask.

"Yes."

"You'll put Escala on the market?"

He frowns.

"Why would I do that?"

I flush.

"To pay for…" my voice trails off… of course.

He smirks at me.

"Trust me, I can afford it."

"Do you like being rich?"

"Yes. Show me someone who doesn't," he says darkly.

Okay, get off that subject quickly.

"Isabella, you're going to have to learn to be rich too, if you say yes," he says softly.

I frown.

"Wealth isn't something I've ever aspired to, Edward."

"You've never been hungry," he says simply.

His words are sobering.

"Where are we going?" I ask brightly, changing the subject.

Edward relaxes.

"To celebrate."

Oh!

"Celebrate what, the house?"

"Have you forgotten already? Your acting editor role."

"Oh yes," I grin. Unbelievably, I had forgotten.

"Where?"

"Up high, at my club."

"Your club?"

"Yes. One of them."

The Mile High club is on the 77th floor of Columbia Tower, higher even than Edward's apartment. It's very now and has the most head-spinning views over Seattle.

"Cristal, Ma'am?" Edward hands me a glass of chilled champagne as I sit perched on a barstool.

"Why thank you, Sir," I stress the last word flirtatiously, batting my eyelashes at him deliberately.

He gazes at me and his face darkens.

"Are you flirting with me, Miss Swan?"

"Yes, Mr. Cullen, I am. What are you going to do about it?"

"I'm sure I can think of something," he says, his voice low. "Come, our table's ready for dinner."

As we approach the table, Edward stops me, his hand on my elbow.

"Go and take your panties off," he whispers.

Oh?

"Go," he commands quietly.

Whoa… what? I blink up at him. He's not smiling, he's deadly serious. Every muscle below my waistline tightens.

I turn sharply on my heel, and head for the restroom.

Shit… what's he going do? Perhaps this club is aptly named. The restrooms are the height of modernity – all dark wood, black granite, and pools of light from strategically placed halogens. In the privacy of the cubicle I smirk as I divest myself of my underwear. Again I'm grateful I changed into the navy blue shift dress. I thought it appropriate attire to meet the good Dr. Banner – I hadn't expected the evening to take this unexpected course. I am excited already. Why does he affect me so? I slightly resent how easily I fall under his spell. I know now that we won't be spending the evening talking through all our issues. Checking my appearance in the mirror, I am bright-eyed and flushed with excitement. *Issues schmissues.* I take a deep breath and head back out into the club. I mean, it's not like I haven't gone pantiless before. My inner goddess is draped in a pink feather boa and diamonds, strutting her stuff in fuck-me shoes.

Edward stands politely when I return to the table, his expression unreadable. He looks his usual perfect, cool, calm and collected self. Of course, I now know differently.

"Sit beside me," he says softly.

I slide into the seat beside him, and he sits.

"I've ordered for you. I hope you don't mind." He hands me my half-finished glass of champagne, regarding me intently. Under his scrutiny I can feel my blood heat anew. He rests his hands on his thighs. I tense and part my legs slightly.

The waiter arrives with a dish of oysters on crushed ice. Oysters… The memory of the two of us in the private dining room at the Heathman fills my mind. We were discussing his contract… Oh boy. We've come a long way since then.

"I think you liked oysters last time you tried them." His voice is low, seductive.

"Only time I've tried them." I'm all breathy, my voice exposing me.

His lips twitch with a smile.

"Oh, Miss Swan, when will you learn?" he muses.

He takes an oyster from the dish and lifts his other hand from his thigh. I flinch in anticipation, but he reaches for a slice of lemon.

"Learn what?" I ask. Jeez, my pulse is racing. His long, skilled fingers gently squeeze the lemon over the shellfish.

"Eat," he says, holding the shell close to my mouth.

Oh. I part my lips and he gently places the shell on my bottom lip. "Tip your head back slowly," he murmurs. I do as he asks and the oyster slips down my throat. He doesn't touch me, only the shell.

Edward helps himself to one, then feeds me another. We continue this tortuous routine until all twelve are gone. His skin never connects with mine… it's driving me crazy.

"Still like oysters?" he asks as I swallow the final one.

I nod, flushed, craving his touch.

"Good."

I squirm in my seat. Why is this so hot?

He puts his hand casually on his own thigh again, and I melt. Now… please.

Touch me. My inner goddess is on her knees, naked except for her panties – begging. He runs his hand up and down his thigh, lifts it… then places it back where it was.

The waiter tops up our champagne glasses and whisks away our plates. Moments later he's back with our entrée – sea bass, I don't believe it – served with asparagus, sautéed potatoes, and a hollandaise sauce.

"Hmm… a favorite of yours, Mr. Cullen?"

"Most definitely, Miss Swan. Though I believe it was cod at the Heathman."

His hand moves up and down his thigh, my breathing spikes, but still he doesn't touch me. It's so frustrating. I try and concentrate on our conversation.

"I seem to remember we were in a private dining room then, discussing contracts."

"Happy days," he says, smirking. "This time I hope to get to fuck you." He moves his hand to pick up his knife.

Gah!

He takes a bite out of his sea bass. *He's doing this on purpose*.

"Don't count on it," I mutter. "Speaking of contracts… the NDA."

"Tear it up," he says simply.

Whoa.

"What? Really?"

"Yes."

"You're sure I'm not going to run to the Seattle Times with an exposé?" I tease.

He laughs, and it's a wonderful sound. He looks so young.

"No. I trust you. I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt."

Oh.

I grin shyly at him.

"Ditto," I breathe.

His eyes light up.

"I'm very glad you're wearing a dress," he murmurs.

And bam, desire courses through my already overheated blood.

"Why haven't you touched me then?" I hiss.

"Missing my touch?" he asks tenderly.

He's amused, the bastard.

"Yes," I seethe.

"Eat," he orders.

"You're not going to touch me, are you?"

"No." He shakes his head.

What? I gasp out loud.

"Just imagine how you'll feel when we're home," he whispers. "I can't wait to get you home."

"It will be your fault if I combust here on the 77th floor," I mutter through gritted teeth.

"Oh, Isabella. We'd find a way to put the fire out," he says, grinning salaciously at me.

I fume as I tuck into my sea bass.

Chapter 83

My inner goddess narrows her eyes in quiet devious contemplation. We can play this game, too. I learned the basics during our meal at the Heathman. I take a bite out of my sea bass. *Hmmm.* Melt-in-the-mouth delicious. I close my eyes, savoring the taste. When I open them, I begin my seduction of Edward Cullen, very slowly hitching my skirt up, exposing more of my thighs.

Edward pauses momentarily, a forkful of fish suspended mid air.

Touch me.

After a beat, he resumes eating. I take another bite of sea bass, ignoring him. Then, putting down my knife, I run my fingers up the inside of my lower thigh, lightly tapping my skin with my fingertips. It's distracting, even to me, especially as I am craving his touch. Edward pauses once more.

"I know what you're doing." His voice is low and husky.

"I know you know, Mr. Cullen," I reply softly. "That's the point." I pick up an asparagus stalk, gaze slowly sideways at him from beneath my lashes, then dip the asparagus into the hollandaise sauce, swirling the tip around and around.

"You're not turning the tables on me, Miss Swan." Smirking, he reaches over and takes the spear from me – amazingly and annoyingly managing to not touch me again. No, this isn't right. This is not going according to plan. Gah!

"Open your mouth," he commands, softly.

I am losing this battle of wills. I glance up at him again and his eyes blaze bright green. Parting my lips a fraction, I run my tongue across my lower lip. Edward smiles slightly, and his eyes darken further.

"Wider," he breathes, his mouth open slightly. I can see his tongue. I groan inwardly.

I briefly bite my bottom lip, then do as he asks. I hear his sharp intake of breath… he's not so immune. Good, I am finally getting to him. My inner goddess fist-pumps the air above her chaise longue.

Keeping my eyes locked on his, I take the spear in my mouth, and suck, gently, delicately, on the end. The hollandaise sauce is mouthwatering. I bite down, moaning quietly in appreciation.

Edward closes his eyes. *YES!* When he opens them again I can see his pupils have dilated. The effect on me is immediate. I groan, and reach out to touch his thigh. To my surprise, he uses his other hand to grab my wrist.

"Oh no you don't, Miss Swan," he murmurs softly. Raising my hand to his mouth, he gently brushes my knuckles with his lips, and I squirm. Finally! *More, please…*

"Don't touch," he scolds me quietly, and places my hand back on my knee. It's so frustrating – this brief, unsatisfactory contact.

"You don't play fair." I pout.

"I know." He picks up his champagne glass to propose a toast and I mirror his actions. "Congratulations on your promotion, Miss Swan." We clink glasses, and I blush.

"Yes, kind of unexpected," I mutter.

He frowns slightly as if some unpleasant thought has crossed his mind.

"Eat," he orders. "I am not taking you home until you've finished your meal, and then we can really celebrate." His expression is so heated, so raw… so commanding. I am melting.

"I'm not hungry. Not for food."

He shakes his head, thoroughly enjoying himself, but narrows his eyes at me just the same.

"Eat, or I'll put you across my knee, right here, and we'll entertain the other diners."

His words make me squirm. He wouldn't dare! Him and his twitchy palm. I press my mouth into a hard line and stare at him. Picking up an asparagus stalk, he dips the head into the hollandaise.

"Eat this," he murmurs, his voice low and seductive. I willingly comply. "You really don't eat enough. You've lost weight since I've known you." His tone is gentle. I don't want to think about my weight. Truth is, I like being this slim. I swallow the asparagus.

"I just want to go home and make love," I mutter disconsolately. Edward grins.

"So do I, and we will. Eat up."

Reluctantly, I turn back to my food and start to eat. Honestly, I've taken my panties off and everything. I feel like a child who has been denied candy. He is such a tease, a delicious, hot, naughty tease. And all mine.

Edward quizzes me about Jasper. It turns out he does business with Rose and Jasper's father. Hmm, small world. I'm relieved he doesn't mention Dr. Banner or the house, as I'm finding it difficult to concentrate on our conversation. I just want to go home. I can feel the anticipation unfurling between us. Between bites, he places his hand on his thigh, so close, just to tease me further. *Bastard!* Finally I finish my food, and place my knife and fork on the plate.

"Good girl," he murmurs, those two words holding so much promise. I frown at him.

"What now?" I ask, desire clawing at my belly. *Oh, I want this man.*

"Now? We leave. I believe you have certain expectations, Miss Swan. Which I intend to fulfil, to the best of my ability."

Whoa!

"The best of your ability?" I stutter. *Holy shit.*

He grins and stands.

"Don't we have to pay?"

He cocks his head to one side.

"I am a member here. They'll bill me. Come, Isabella, after you." He steps aside and I stand to leave, conscious that I am not wearing my panties. He gazes at me darkly, like he's undressing me, and I glory in his carnal appraisal. It just makes me feel so sexy – this beautiful man desires me. Will I always get a kick out of this? Deliberately stopping in front of him, I smooth my dress over my hips.

Edward whispers in my ear.

"I can't wait to get you home." But he still doesn't touch me. On the way out, he murmurs something about the car to the maître d', but I'm not listening. My inner goddess is incandescent with anticipation. Jeez, she could light up Seattle.

Waiting by the elevators, we are joined by two middle-aged couples. When the doors open, Edward takes my elbow and steers me to the back. I glance around… we're surrounded by dark smoked-glass mirrors. As the other couples enter, one man, in a rather unflattering brown suit, greets Edward.

"Cullen," he nods politely.

Edward nods in return but is silent.

The couples stand in front of us, facing the elevator doors. They are obviously friends; the women chat loudly and animatedly about their evening and their meal. I think they're all a little tipsy.

As the doors close, Edward briefly stoops down beside me to tie his shoelace. Odd… his shoelaces aren't undone. Discreetly, he places his hand on my ankle, startling me, and as he stands, his hand travels swiftly up my leg, skating deliciously over my skin – *whoa* – right up. I have to stifle my gasp of surprise as his hand reaches my backside. Edward moves behind me.

Oh my. I gape at the people in front of us, staring at the backs of their heads. They have no idea. Wrapping his free arm around my waist, Edward pulls me to him, holding me in place as his fingers explore. *Holy fucking crow… in here!?*

The elevator travels smoothly down, stopping at the 53rd floor to let some more people on, but I am not paying attention. I am focused on every little move his fingers make. Now they're easing around, as we shuffle back.

Again I stifle a groan, his fingers finding their goal.

"Always so ready, Miss Swan," he whispers as he slips a long finger inside me.

I squirm and gasp. How can he do this, with all these people here?

"Keep still and quiet," he warns, murmuring in my ear.

I am flushed, warm, wanting, trapped in an elevator with seven people, six of them oblivious to what's occurring in the corner. His finger slides in and out of me, again and again. My breathing, jeez… it's embarrassing. I want to tell him to stop… and continue… and stop. I sag against him, and he tightens his arm around me. I can feel his erection.

We halt again at the 44th floor. Oh, how long is this torture going to continue? In… out… in… out… Subtly, I grind myself against his persistent finger. After all this time of not touching me, he chooses now! And it makes me feel so… wanton.

"Hush," he breathes, seemingly unaffected, as yet two more people come aboard. The elevator is getting crowded. Edward moves us both further back, so that we're now pressed into the corner, holding me in place and torturing me further. He nuzzles my hair. I'm sure we look like a young couple in love, canoodling in the corner, if anyone could be bothered to turn round and see what we're doing. And he eases a second finger inside me.

Fuck! I groan, and I'm thankful that the gaggle of people in front of us are still chatting away, totally oblivious.

Oh, Edward, what you do to me. I lean my head back against his chest, closing my eyes, surrendering to his to unrelenting fingers.

"Don't come," he whispers. "I want that later." He splays his hand out on my belly, pressing down slightly, as he continues his sweet persecution. The feeling is exquisite.

Finally, the elevator reaches the first floor. With a loud ping the doors open, and almost instantly the passengers start exiting. Edward slowly slips his fingers out of me and kisses the back of my head. I glance around at him, and he smiles, then nods again at Mr. Badly Fitted Brown Suit, who returns his nod of acknowledgment as he shuffles out of the elevator with his wife. I barely notice, concentrating instead on staying upright and trying to manage my panting. Jeez, I feel aching and bereft. Edward releases me, leaving me to stand on my own two feet without leaning on him.

Turning, I gaze up at him. He looks cool and unruffled, his usual composed self. Hmmm… This is so not fair.

"Ready?" he asks. His eyes gleam wickedly as he slips first his index, then his middle finger into his mouth, and sucks on them. "Mighty fine, Miss Swan," he says.

I nearly convulse on the spot.

"I can't believe you just did that," I murmur and I'm practically coming apart at the seams.

"You'd be surprised what I can do, Miss Swan," he says.

Reaching out, he tucks a lock of hair behind my ear, a slight smile betraying his amusement.

"I want to get you home, but maybe we'll only make it as far as the car." He grins down at me as he takes my hand and leads me out of the elevator.

What! Sex in the car? Can't we just do it here on the cool marble of the lobby floor… please?

"Come."

"Yes, I want to."

"Miss Swan!" he admonishes me with mock-amused horror.

"I've never had sex in a car," I mumble.

Edward stops, and places those same fingers under my chin, tipping my head back and glaring down at me.

"I'm very pleased to hear that. I have to say I'd be very surprised, not to say mad, if you had."

I flush, blinking up at him. Of course… I've only had sex with him. I frown at him.

"That's not what I meant."

"What did you mean?" His tone is unexpectedly harsh.

"Edward, it was just an expression."

"The famous expression, 'I've never had sex in a car'. Yes, it just trips off the tongue."

Jeez, what's his problem?

"Edward, I wasn't thinking. For heaven's sake, you've just… err, done… *that* to me, in an elevator full of people. My wits are slightly scattered."

He raises his eyebrows.

"What did I do to you?"

I scowl at him. He wants me to say it.

"You turned me on, big time. Now take me home and fuck me."

His mouth drops open slightly, and then he laughs, surprised. Now he looks his age, young and carefree. Oh, to hear him laugh. I love it, because it's so rare.

"You're a born romantic, Miss Swan."

-x-

He takes my hand and we head out of the building to where the valet stands by my Saab.

"So you want sex in a car," Edward murmurs as he switches on the ignition.

"Quite frankly, I would have been happy with the lobby floor."

"Trust me, Bella, so would I. But I don't enjoy being arrested at this time of night, and I didn't want to fuck you in a restroom. Well, not today."

What?

"You mean there was a possibility?"

"Oh yes."

"Let's go back."

He turns to gaze at me and laughs. His laughter is infectious, and soon we're both laughing – wonderful, cathartic, head-held-back laughter. Reaching over, he places his hand on my knee, caressing it gently with long skilled fingers. I stop laughing.

"Patience, Isabella," he breathes, and pulls into the Seattle traffic.

-x-

He parks the Saab in the Escala garage and turns off the engine. Suddenly, in the confines of the car, the atmosphere between us changes. With wanton anticipation I glance at him, trying to contain my palpitating heart. He's turned towards me, leaning against the door, his elbow propped on the steering wheel. He pulls his lower lip with his thumb and index finger. His mouth is so distracting… I want it on me. He's watching me intently, his eyes dark jade. My mouth goes dry. He smiles a slow, sexy smile.

"We will fuck in the car, at a time and place of my choosing. Right now, I want to take you on every available surface of my apartment."

It's like he's addressing me below the waist. My inner goddess performs four arabesques and a pas de Basque.

"Yes." Jeez, I sound so breathy, desperate.

He leans forward a fraction. I close my eyes, waiting for his kiss, thinking *finally*… but nothing happens.

After a moment I open my eyes, blinking, to find him gazing at me. I can't figure out what he's thinking, but before I can say anything he distracts me once more.

"If I kiss you now we won't make it into the apartment. Come."

Gah! Could this man be any more frustrating? He climbs out of the car.

Once again we wait for the elevator, my body thrumming with anticipation. Edward holds my hand, running his thumb to and fro across my knuckles, rhythmically, each stroke echoing through me. Oh, I want his hands on all of me. He's tortured me long enough.

"So, what happened to instant gratification?" I murmur, while we wait.

Edward smirks down at me.

"It's not appropriate in every situation, Isabella."

"Since when?"

"Since this evening."

"Why are you torturing me so?"

"Tit for tat, Miss Swan."

"How am I torturing you?"

"I think you know."

I gaze at up at him and his expression is so difficult to read. He wants my answer… that's it.

"Well, I'm into delayed gratification too," I whisper, smiling shyly.

He tugs my hand unexpectedly, and suddenly I am in his arms. He grabs my hair at the nape of my neck, pulling gently so my head tips back.

"What can I do to make you say yes?" he asks fervently, throwing me off balance once more. I blink at him, at his lovely, serious, desperate expression.

"Give me some time? Please," I stutter.

He groans, and finally he kisses me, long and hard, and then we're in the elevator, and we're all hands and mouths and tongues and lips and fingers and hair. Desire, thick and strong, lances through my blood, clouding all my reason. He pushes me against the wall, pinning me with his hips, one hand in my hair, the other at my chin, holding me in place.

"You own me," he whispers. "My fate is in your hands, Bella."

His words are intoxicating and in my overheated state, I want to rip him out of his clothes. I push off his jacket, and as the elevator arrives at the apartment we tumble out into the foyer. Edward pins me to the wall by the elevator, his jacket falling to the floor, and his hand travels up my leg, his lips never leaving mine. He hoists up my dress.

"First surface here," he breathes and abruptly he lifts me. "Wrap your legs around me." I do as I'm told, and he turns and lays me down on the foyer table, so he's standing between my legs. I'm aware that the usual vase of flowers is missing… huh? Reaching into his jeans pocket, he fishes out a foil packet and hands it to me, undoing his flies.

"Do you know how much you turn me on?"

"What?" I pant. "No… I…"

"Well you do," he mutters. "All the time." He grabs the foil packet from my hands. Oh, this is so quick, after all his tantalizing teasing, but I want him, so badly… right now. He gazes down at me as he rolls on the condom, then puts his hands under my thighs, spreading my legs wider. Positioning himself, he pauses.

“Keep your eyes open. I want to see you,” he whispers, and clasping both my hands with his, he sinks slowly into me.

I try, I really do, but the feeling is so exquisite, what I’ve been waiting for after all his teasing. Oh, the fullness, this feeling. I groan and arch my back off the table.

“Open!” he growls, tightening his hands on mine and thrusting sharply into me so that I cry out.

I blink my eyes open and he stares down at me wide-eyed. Slowly, he withdraws, then sinks into me once more, his mouth slackening and then forming an Ah, but he says nothing. Seeing his arousal, his reaction to me – *oh my* – I light up inside, my blood scorching through my veins. His green eyes burn into mine. He picks up the rhythm, and I revel in it, glory in it. Watching him, watching me. His passion, his… love, as we both come apart … together.

I call out as I explode around him, and Edward follows.

"Yes, Bella!" he cries. He collapses on me, releasing my hands, resting his head on my chest. My legs are still wrapped around him, and under the patient, watchful, maternal eyes of the Madonna paintings, I cradle his head against me and struggle to catch my breath.

He raises his head to look at me.

"I've not finished with you yet," he murmurs. Leaning up, he kisses me.

-x-

I lie naked in Edward's bed, sprawled over his chest, panting. Holy cow – does his energy ever wane?

Edward trails his fingers up and down my back.

"Satisfied, Miss Swan?"

I murmur my assent. I have no energy left for talking. Raising my head, I turn unfocused eyes to him and bask in his warm, fond gaze. Very deliberately, I angle my head down so he knows I am going to kiss his chest. He tenses momentarily, and I plant a soft kiss in his chest hair, breathing in his unique Edward smell, mixed with sweat and sex. It's heady.

He rolls on to his side so that I'm lying beside him, and gazes down at me.

"Is sex like this for everyone? I'm surprised anyone ever goes out," I murmur, feeling suddenly shy.

He grins.

"I can't speak for everyone, but it's pretty damned special with you, Isabella." He bends and kisses me.

"That's because you're pretty damned special, Mr. Cullen," I agree, smiling up at him and caressing his face. He blinks down at me, at a loss.

"It's late. Go to sleep," he says. He kisses me, and then lays down and pulls me to him so we're spooning in bed.

"You don't like compliments."

"Go to sleep, Isabella."

Hmmm… But he is pretty damned special. Jeez, why doesn't he realize this?

"I loved the house," I murmur.

He says nothing for a moment, but I can feel his grin.

"I love you. Go to sleep." He nuzzles my hair and I drift into sleep, safe in his arms, dreaming of sunsets and French doors and wide staircases… and a small copper-haired boy running through a meadow, laughing and giggling as I chase him.

-x-

"Gotta go, baby." Edward kisses me just below my ear.

I open my eyes and it's morning. I turn to face him. He's up and dressed and fresh and delicious, leaning over me.

"What time is it?" Oh no, I don't want to be late.

"Don't panic. I have a breakfast meeting." He rubs his nose against mine.

"You smell good," I murmur, stretching out beneath him, my limbs pleasurably tight and creaky from all our exploits yesterday. I wrap my arms around his neck. "Don't go…"

He cocks his head to one side and raises his eyebrow.

"Miss Swan, are you trying to keep a man from an honest day's work?"

I nod sleepily at him and he smiles at me, his new shy smile.

"As tempting as you are, I have to go."

He kisses me, and stands. He's wearing a really sharp dark navy suit, white shirt and navy tie, and he looks every inch the CEO… the hot CEO.

"Laters, baby," he murmurs and he's off.

Glancing at the clock, I note it's already 7:00 – I must have slept through the alarm. Well, time to get up.

In the shower, inspiration hits me. I've thought of another birthday present for Edward. It's so difficult to buy something for the man who has everything. I've already given him my main present, and I still have the other item I bought at the tourist shop, but this is one present that will really be for me. I hug myself in anticipation as I switch off the shower. I just have to prepare it…

In the walk-in closet, I put on a dark green fitted dress with a square neckline, cut quite low. Yes, this will do for work. Now for Edward's present… I start to rummage through his drawers, looking for his ties. In the bottom drawer I find those faded, ripped jeans, the ones he wears in the playroom, the ones he looks so hot in. They're so soft. I stroke them gently.

Beneath them, I find a large black, flat cardboard box. It piques my interest immediately. What's in here? I stare at it, feeling like I'm trespassing again. Taking it out, I shake it. It's heavy, like it holds papers or manuscripts. I cannot resist. I open the lid, and quickly shut it again. Holy fuck – photographs, from the Red Room. The shock makes me sit back on my heels, as I try to wipe the image from my brain.

Why did I open the box?

Why has he kept them?

I shudder. My subconscious scowls at me. *This is before you. Forget them*. She's right.

Standing up, I notice his ties are hanging at the end of his clothes rail. I find the one I want and exit quickly.

I try to tell myself those photos are BB – Before Bella. My subconscious nods with approval, but it's with a heavier heart that I head into the main room for breakfast.

Mrs. Cope smiles at me warmly, then frowns slightly.

"Everything all right, Bella?" she asks kindly.

"Yes," I murmur, distracted. "Do you have a key to the… err… playroom?"

She pauses momentarily, surprised.

"Yes, of course." She unclips a small bunch of keys from her belt. "What would you like for breakfast, dear?" she asks as she hands me the keys.

"Just granola. I won't be long."

I feel more ambivalent about this gift now, but only since the discovery of those photographs. *Nothing's changed*, my subconscious barks at me again, glaring at me over her half moon winged glasses. *That picture was hot*, my inner goddess chips in, and mentally I scowl at her. Yes, it was… too hot for me.

What else does he have hidden away? Quickly, I ferret through the museum chest, take what I need, and lock the playroom door behind me. Wouldn't do for Jake to discover this!

I hand back the keys to Mrs. Cope and sit down to devour my breakfast, feeling odd that Edward is absent, *that* image dancing around my mind. I wonder who it was… Lauren perhaps?

-x-

On my drive into work, I debate whether or not to tell Edward I found his photographs. *Noooo,* screams my subconscious, her Edvard Munch face on. I decide she's probably right.

-x-

As I sit down at my desk, my BlackBerry buzzes.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Surfaces
Date: 19 June 2009 08.59
To: Isabella Swan

I calculate that there are at least 10 surfaces to go. I am looking forward to each and every one of them. Then there's the floors, the walls – and let's not forget the balcony.
After that, there's my office…
Miss you.
x

Edward Cullen,
Priapic CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

His email makes me smile, and all my earlier reservations evaporate. It's me he wants now, and memories of last night's sexcapades flood my mind… the elevator, the foyer, the bed… priapic is right. I wonder idly what the female equivalent might be.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Romance?
Date: 19 June 2009: 09.03
To: Edward Cullen

Mr. Cullen
You have a one-track mind.
I missed you at breakfast.
But Mrs. Cope was very accommodating.
B x

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Intrigued
Date: 19 June 2009 09.07
To: Isabella Swan

What was Mrs. Cope accommodating about?
What are you up to, Miss Swan?

Edward Cullen
Curious CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

How does he know?

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Tapping Nose
Date: 19 June 2009: 09.10
To: Edward Cullen

Wait and see – it's a surprise.
I need to work… let me be.
Love you.
B x

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Frustrated
Date: 19 June 2009 09.12
To: Isabella Swan

I hate it when you keep things from me.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

I stare at the small screen of my BlackBerry. The vehemence implicit in his email takes me by surprise. Why does he feel like this? It's not like I'm hiding erotic photographs of my exes.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Indulging you
Date: 19 June 2009: 09.14
To: Edward Cullen

It's for your birthday.
Another surprise.
Don't be so petulant.
B x

He doesn't reply immediately, and I'm called into a meeting so I can't dwell on it for too long.

-x-

When I next glance at my BlackBerry, to my horror, I realize it's four in the afternoon. Where has the day gone? Still no message from Edward. I decide to email him again.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Hello
Date: 19 June 2009: 16.03
To: Edward Cullen

Are you not talking to me?
Don't forget I am going for a drink with Jake, and that he's staying with us tonight.
Please have a re-think about joining us.
B x

He doesn't reply and I feel a frisson of unease. Jeez, I hope he's okay. Calling his mobile, I get his voicemail. The announcement simply says "Cullen. Leave a message," in his most clipped tone.

"Hi… errr… it's me. Isabella. Are you okay? Call me," I stutter through my message. I've never had to leave one for him before. I flush as I hang up. *Of course he'll know it's you, idiot!* My subconscious rolls her eyes at me. I am tempted to ring his PA Angela, but decide that's a step too far. Reluctantly, I continue my work.

My phone rings unexpectedly, and my heart jumps. Edward! But no, it's Rose.

"Bella!" she shouts from wherever she is.

"Rose! Are you back? I've missed you."

"Me too. I have so much to tell you. We're at Seatac – me and my man." She giggles in a most un-Roselike way.

"Cool. I have so much to tell you, too."

"See you back at the apartment?"

"I'm having drinks with Jake. Join us."

"Jake's in town? Sure! Text me where."

"Okay," I beam. My best friend is home! After all this time!

"You good, Bella?"

"Yeah, I'm fine."

"Still with Edward?"

"Yes."

"Good. Laters!"

Oh, not her as well. Emmett's influence knows no bounds.

"Yeah. Laters, baby." I grin and she hangs up.

Wow… Rose is home. How am I going to tell her all that has happened? I should write it down, so I don't forget anything.

-x-

An hour later my office phone rings… Edward? No, it's Claire.

"You should see the guy asking for you in reception. How come you know all these hot guys, Bella?"

Jacob must be here. I glance at the clock – it's 5:55, and a small thrill of excitement pulses through me. I haven't seen him in ages.

"Bells… wow! You look great. So grown up." Just because I'm wearing a smart dress… jeez! He hugs me hard. "And tall," he mutters in amazement.

"It's just the shoes, Jake. You don't look so bad yourself."

He's wearing jeans, a black t-shirt, and a black and white check flannel shirt. He looks cute.

"I'll grab my things and we can go."

"Cool. I'll wait here."

-x-

I pick up two Rolling Rocks from the crowded bar and head over the table where Jake is seated.

"You found Edward's place okay?"

"Yeah. I haven't been inside, just delivered the photos to the service elevator. Some guy named Taylor took them up. Looks like quite a place."

"It is. You should see inside."

"Can't wait. Cheers, Bella. Seattle agrees with you."

I flush as we clink bottles. *It's Edward that agrees with me.*

"Cheers. Tell me about your show, and how it went."

He beams and launches into the story. He sold all but three of his photos, which has taken care of his student loans and left him some cash to spare.

"And I've been commissioned to do some landscapes for the Portland Tourist Authority. Pretty cool, huh?" he finishes proudly.

"Oh, Jake – that's wonderful. Not interfering with your studies though?" I frown at him.

"Nah. Now that you guys have gone, and three of the guys I used to hang out with, I have more time."

"No hot babe to keep you busy? Last time I saw you, you had half a dozen women hanging on your every word." I arch an eyebrow at him.

"Nah, Bella. None of them are woman enough for me." He's all bravado.

"Oh, sure. Jacob Black, ladykiller…" I giggle.

"Hey, I have my moments, Swan." He looks vaguely hurt, and I am chastened.

"Sure you do," I mollify him.

"So, how's Cullen?" he asks, his tone changing, becoming colder.

"He's good. We're good," I murmur.

"Serious, you say?"

"Yes. Serious."

"He's not too old for you?"

"Oh, Jake. You know what my mom says – I was born old."

Jake's mouth twists wryly.

"How is your mom?"

And like that, we are out of the danger zone.

"BELLA!"

I turn and there's Rose, with Jasper. She looks gorgeous; sun-kissed, bleached blond hair, golden tan and beaming white smile, shapely in her white cami and tight white jeans. All eyes are on Rose. I leap up from my seat to give her a hug. Oh, how I've missed this woman!

She pushes me away from her and holds me at arm's length, examining me closely. I flush under her intense gaze.

"You've lost weight. A lot of weight. And you look… older. What's been going on?" she says, all mother-hen concerned and bossy. "I like your dress. Suits you."

"A lot's happened since you went away. I'll tell you later, when we're on our own." I am not ready for the Rosalie Hale Inquisition just yet. She regards me suspiciously.

"You're okay?" she asks gently.

"Yes," I smile, though I'd be happier knowing where Edward is.

"Cool."

"Hi, Jasper." I grin at him and he gives me a brief hug.

"Thanks for introducing me to Alice," he whispers in my ear.

Jake frowns at him.

Oh!

"Thought you guys would hit it off," I murmur back at Jasper, and he beams at me. "Jasper, you know Jake?"

"We've met once," Jake mutters, assessing Jasper as they shake hands.

"Yeah, at Rose's place in Vancouver," Jasper says, smiling pleasantly at Jake. "Right – who's for a drink?"

-x-

I make my way to the restrooms. While there I text Edward our location… perhaps he'll join us. There are no missed calls from him, and no emails. *This is not like him.*

"Whassup, Bells?" Jake asks as I come back to the table.

"I can't reach Edward. I hope he's okay."

"He'll be fine. Like another beer?"

"Sure."

Rose leans across.

"Jasper says some mad stalker ex-girlfriend was in the apartment with a gun?"

"Well… yeah." I shrug apologetically. Oh jeez, do we have to do this now?

"Bella, what the hell's been going on?" Rose stops abruptly and checks her phone.

"Hi Baby," she says. *Baby!?* She frowns and looks at me. "Sure." She sets down the phone, and turns to me. "It's Emmett… he wants to talk to you."

"Bella." Emmett's voice is clipped and quiet and my scalp prickles ominously.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Edward. He's not made it back from Portland."

"What? What do you mean?"

"His helicopter has gone missing."

"Echo Charlie?" I whisper as all the breath leaves my body. "No!"

Chapter 84

I stare at the flames, mesmerized. They dance and weave, bright blazing orange with tips of cobalt blue, in the fireplace at Edward's apartment. In spite of the heat pumping out of the fire, and the blanket draped around my shoulders, I am cold… bone chillingly cold.

I'm aware of hushed voices… many hushed voices. But they're in the background, a distant buzz… I don't hear the words. All I can hear, all I can focus on, is the soft hiss of the gas from the fire. My thoughts turn to the house we saw yesterday and the great fireplaces… real fireplaces, for burning wood… *hmmm.* I'd like to make love with Edward in front of a real fire. I would like to make love with Edward in front of this fire. Yes, that would be fun. No doubt he'd think of some way to make it memorable… like all the times we've made love. I snort wryly to myself. Even the times when we were just fucking… Yes, those were pretty memorable, too. *Where is he?*

The flames shimmy and flicker, holding me captive, keeping me numb… I focus solely on their flaring, scorching beauty... they are bewitching.

Isabella, you've bewitched me. He said that the first time he slept with me in my bed. *Oh no*… I wrap my arms around myself, the world falls away from me, and reality bleeds into my consciousness. The creeping emptiness inside me expands some more… *Echo Charlie is missing.*

"Bella, here," Mrs. Cope gently coaxes me, her voice bringing me back into the room, into the now… into the anguish. She hands me a cup of tea. I take the cup and saucer gratefully, the rattle betraying my shaking hands.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice hoarse from unshed tears and the large lump in my throat.

Alice sits across from me on the larger-than-large U-shaped couch, holding hands with Esme. They gaze at me, pain and anxiety etched on their lovely faces. Esme looks older… a mother worried for her son. I blink dispassionately at them. I can't offer a reassuring smile, a tear – there's nothing, just blankness and the growing emptiness. I gaze at Emmett, Jake, and Jasper, who stand around the breakfast bar, all serious faces, talking quietly. Discussing something in soft subdued voices. Behind them, Mrs. Cope busies herself in the kitchen.

Rose is in the TV room, monitoring the local news. I can hear faint sounds from the big plasma TV squawking in the background. I can't bear to see the news item again… Edward Cullen Missing… his beautiful face on the TV.

Idly, it occurs to me that I've never seen so many people in this room, and yet they are still dwarfed by its sheer size… little islands of lost, anxious people in my Fifty's home. What would he think about them being here?

Somewhere, Taylor and Carlisle are talking to the authorities. Information is being drip-fed through… but it's all meaningless. The fact is – he's missing. He's been missing for eight hours. No sign, no word from him. The search has been called off… this much I do know. It's just too dark. And we don't know where he is. He could be hurt, hungry… or worse… *no!*

I offer another silent prayer to God. Please let Edward be okay… please let Edward be okay. I repeat it over and over in my head – my mantra, my lifeline, something concrete to cling to in my desperation. I refuse to think the worst. No… don't go there. There is hope. *You're my lifeline*… Edward's words come back to haunt me. Yes, there is always hope… I must not despair. His words echo through my mind. '*I'm now a firm advocate of instant gratification. Carpe diem, Bella…' Why didn't I seize the day?*

'*I'm doing this because I've finally met someone I want to spend the rest of my life with.'*

Please, let the rest of his life not be this short… please, please. I close my eyes tightly in silent prayer, rocking gently. We haven't had enough time… we need more time. We've done so much in the last few weeks… come so far… it can't end. All our tender moments... the lipstick… when he really made love to me for the first time at the Olympic hotel… on his knees in front of me, offering himself to me… finally touching him. '*I am just the same, Bella. I love you and I need you. Touch me. Please.'* Oh… I love him so… I will be nothing without him, nothing but a shadow – all the light eclipsed. No, no, no… my poor Edward.

'*This is me, Bella. All of me… and I'm all yours. What do I have to do to make you realize that? To make you see that I want you, any way I can get you. That I love you.'* And I you, my Fifty Shades.

I open my eyes and gaze unseeing into the fire once more, memories of our time together flitting through my mind: his boyish joy when we were sailing and gliding, his suave, sophisticated, hot-as-hell look at the masked ball… Dancing, oh yes… dancing here in the apartment to Frank, whirling round the room… His quiet, anxious hope yesterday, at the house… that stunning view. All for me. *'I will lay my world at your feet, Isabella. I want you, body and soul, forever.'*Oh… please let him be okay. He cannot be gone… He is the center of my universe.

An involuntary sob escapes my throat, and I clutch my hand to my mouth. *No*… I must be strong.

Jake is suddenly at my side… or has he been there a while? I have no idea.

"Do you want to call your mom or dad?" he asks gently.

No! I shake my head and clutch Jake's hand. I cannot speak, I know I will dissolve if I do… but the warmth and gentle squeeze of his hand offers me no solace. Oh, Mom… my lip trembles at the thought of my mother. Should I call my mom…? No… I couldn't deal with her reaction. Maybe Charlie, he wouldn't get emotional – he never gets emotional, not even when the Mariners lose…

Esme rises to join the boys, distracting me. That must be the longest she's sat still. Alice comes to sit beside me, too, and grabs my other hand.

"He will come back," she says, her voice initially determined, but cracking slightly on the last word. Her eyes are wide and red-rimmed, her face pale and pinched from lack of sleep.

I gaze up at Jasper, who is watching Alice, and Emmett, who has his arms around Esme. I glance at the clock. It's after eleven, heading towards midnight. Damn time! With each passing hour, the clawing emptiness expands, filling everything… blocking everything. And I know deep down inside that I am preparing myself… preparing myself for the worst. I close my eyes and offer up another silent prayer, clasping both Alice and Jakes' hands…

Opening them again, I stare into the flames once more. I can see his shy smile… my favorite of all his expressions, a glimpse of the real Edward, my real Edward. He is so many people: control freak, CEO, stalker, sex-god, Dom – and at the same time such a boy… with his toys. I smile. His car, his boat, his plane… *Echo Charlie… no… no… a lost boy…* my smile fades, and pain lances through me. I remember him in the shower, wiping away the lipstick marks. '*I'm nothing, Isabella. I am a husk of a man. I don't have a heart.'* The lump in my throat expands. *Oh Edward, you do, you do have a heart, and it's mine.* I want to cherish it forever. Even though he's so complex and difficult, I love him. I will always love him. There will never be anyone else… Ever.

I remember sitting in Starbucks, weighing up my Edward pros and cons. All those cons, even those photographs I found this morning, all these melt into insignificance now… There's just him… and whether he'll come back. Oh please Lord, bring him back, please let him be okay… I'll go to church… I'll do anything. Oh, if I get him back, I shall seize the day… and I hear his voice once more: *'Carpe Diem, Bella.'*

I gaze deeper into the fire, the flames still licking and curling around each other, blazing brightly. Then Esme shrieks… and everything goes into slow motion. *"Edward!"*

I turn my head in time to see Esme barreling across the floor from where she had been pacing somewhere behind me… and in the entrance of the great room stands a dismayed Edward. He's dressed in just his shirtsleeves and suit pants, and he's holding his navy jacket, shoes, and socks. He looks tired, dirty, and utterly beautiful. *Holy Fuck… Edward.*

He's alive. I gaze numbly at him, trying to work out if I'm hallucinating or if he's really here… *Oh my.*

His expression is one of utter bewilderment. He drops his jacket and shoes in time to catch Esme, who throws her arms around his neck and kisses him hard on the cheek.

"Mom?"

Edward gazes down at Esme, completely at a loss.

"I thought I'd never see you again," Esme whispers, voicing our collective fears.

"Mom, I'm here." I can hear the consternation in his voice.

"I died a thousand deaths today," she whispers, her voice barely audible, echoing my thoughts. She gasps and sobs, no longer able to hold back her tears. Edward frowns, horrified or mortified – I don't know which – then, after a beat, envelops her in a huge hug, holding her close.

"Oh, Edward," she chokes, wrapping her arms around him, weeping copiously into his chest – all self-restraint forgotten – and Edward doesn't balk… he just holds her, rocking slightly… comforting her.

And I am gone... scalding tears pool in my eyes.

Carlisle hollers from the hallway, "He's alive! Shit – you're here!" He appears, presumably from Taylor's office, clutching his cell phone, and embraces both of them, his eyes closed in sweet relief.

"Dad…?"

Alice squeals something unintelligible from beside me, then she's up, running, joining her parents, hugging all of them, too.

Finally, the tears start to cascade down my cheeks. He's here… he's fine. But I cannot move.

Carlisle is the first to pull away, wiping his eyes, and clapping Edward on the shoulder. Alice releases them, and Esme steps back.

"Sorry…" she mumbles.

"Hey, Mom – it's okay," Edward says, consternation still evident on his face.

"Where were you? What happened?" Esme stutters, and puts her head in her hands.

"Mom – " Edward mutters. He draws her into his arms again and kisses the top of her head. "I'm here. I'm good. It's just taken me an age to get from Portland. What's with the welcoming committee?" He looks up and scans the room… until his eyes lock with mine. He blinks at me, and glances briefly at Jake, who lets go of my hand. Edward's mouth tightens slightly.

I drink in the sight of him, and relief courses through me, leaving me spent, exhausted… and completely elated. Yet my tears don't stop. Edward turns his attention back to his mother.

"Mom, I'm good. What's wrong?" Edward says reassuringly. She places her hands on either side of his face.

"Edward, you've been missing. Your flight plan – you never made it to Seattle. Why didn't you contact us?"

Edward's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"I didn't think it would take this long."

"Why didn't you call?"

"No power in my cell."

"You didn't stop… call collect?"

"Mom – it's a long story."

"Oh, Edward! Don't you ever do that to me again! Do you understand?" she half shouts at him.

"Yes, Mom." He wipes her tears away with his thumb, and hugs her once more.

When she composes herself, he releases her to hug Alice, who slaps him hard on the chest.

"You had us so worried…!" she blurts out, and she too is in tears.

"I'm here now, for heaven's sake," Edward mutters.

As Emmett comes forward, Edward relinquishes Alice to Carlisle, who already has one arm around his wife. He curls the other around his daughter. Emmett hugs Edward briefly, much to Edward's surprise, and slaps him hard on the back.

"Great to see you…" Emmett says loudly, if a little gruffly, trying to hide his emotion.

As the tears stream down my face, I can see it all. The great room is bathed in it – unconditional love. He has it in spades – he's just never accepted it before, and even now, he's totally at sea. Look, Edward, all these people love you! Perhaps now you'll start believing it…

Rose is standing behind me – she must have left the TV room. She gently strokes my hair.

"He's really here, Bella," she murmurs comfortingly.

"I'm going to say hi to my girl now," Edward tells his parents. Both nod, smile, and step aside… and he's moving towards me, green eyes bright, though weary and still bemused. From somewhere deep inside, I find the strength to stagger to my feet, and bolt into his open arms.

"Edward…!" I sob.

"Hush," he says, and holds me, burying his face in my hair, inhaling deeply. I raise my tear-stained face to his, and he kisses me… far too briefly.

"Hi," he murmurs.

"Hi," I whisper back, the lump in the back of my throat burning.

"Miss me?"

"A bit…"

He grins.

"I can tell." And with a gentle touch of his hand, he wipes away the tears that refuse to stop running down my cheeks.

"I thought… I thought…" I choke.

"I can see. Hush – I'm here. I'm sorry. Later," he murmurs, and kisses me chastely again.

"Are you okay?" Releasing him, I put my hands on his chest, his arms, on his waist – just feeling this warm, vital, sensual man beneath my fingers – reassuring myself that he is standing here in front of me. He's back. He doesn't so much as flinch. He just regards me intently.

"I'm okay. I'm not going anywhere."

"Oh, thank God," I clasp him round his waist again, and he hugs me once more. "Are you hungry? Do you need something to drink?"

"Yes."

I step back to fetch him something, but he doesn't let me go. He tucks me under his arm and extends a hand to Jake.

"Mr. Cullen," says Jake evenly.

Edward snorts slightly.

"Edward, please," he says.

"Edward, welcome back. Glad you're okay… and err – thanks for letting me stay."

"No problem." Edward narrows his eyes at him slightly, but he's distracted by Mrs. Cope, who is suddenly at his side. It only occurs to me now that she's not her usual smart self… I hadn't noticed it before. Her hair is loose, and she's in soft grey leggings and a large grey sweatshirt that dwarfs her, *WSU Cougars* emblazoned on the front. She looks years younger.

"Can I get you something, Mr. Cullen?" She wipes her eyes with a tissue.

Edward smiles fondly at her.

"A beer, please, Gail. Budvar – and a bite to eat."

"I'll fetch it," I murmur, wanting to do something for my man.

"No. Don't go," he says softly, tightening his arm around me.

The rest of his family close in, and Jasper and Rose join us. He shakes Jasper's hand and gives Rose a quick peck on the cheek.

Mrs. Cope returns with a bottle of beer and a glass. He takes the bottle, but shakes his head at the glass. She smiles and returns to the kitchen.

"Surprised you don't want something stronger…" mutters Emmett. "So what the fuck happened to you? First I knew was when Dad called me to say the chopper was missing…"

"Emmett!" Esme scolds.

"Helicopter," Edward growls, correcting Emmett. Emmett grins… I suspect this is a family joke.

"Let's sit, and I'll tell you." Edward pulls me over to the couch, and everyone sits down, all eyes on him. He takes a long draught of his beer.

He spies Taylor hovering at the entrance, and nods. Taylor nods back.

"Your daughter?"

"She's fine now. False alarm, Sir."

"Good." Edward smiles.

Daughter...? What happened to Taylor's daughter?

"Glad you're back, Sir. Will that be all?"

"We have a helicopter to collect."

Taylor smiles.

"Now? Or will the morning do?"

"Morning, I think, Taylor."

"Very good, Mr. Cullen. Anything else, Sir?"

Edward shakes his head, and raises his bottle to him. Taylor gives him a rare smile – rarer than Edward's, I think – and heads out, presumably to his office or up to his room.

"Edward, what happened?" demands Carlisle.

Edward launches into his story: Kate, his number two, and he were flying in Echo Charlie to WSU in Vancouver to deal with a funding issue… I can barely keep up, I am so dazed. I just hold Edward's hand, and stare at his manicured fingernails… his long fingers… the wrinkles on his knuckles … his wristwatch – an Omega with three small dials. I gaze up at his beautiful profile as he continues his tale.

"Kate had never seen Mount St. Helens, so on the way back, as a celebration, we took a quick detour. I heard the TFR was lifted last week, and I wanted to take a look. Well, it's fortunate that we did. We were flying low, about 200 ft AGL, when the instrument panel lit up. We had a fire in the tail – I had no choice but to cut all the electronics and land." He

shakes his head at the memory. "I set her down by Silver Lake, got Kate out, and managed to put the fire out."

"A fire? Both engines?" Carlisle is horrified.

"Yep."

"Shit! But I thought…"

"I know," Edward interrupts him. "It was sheer luck I was flying so low," he murmurs. I shudder… he releases my hand and puts his arm around me.

"Cold?" he asks me. I shake my head.

"How did you put out the fire?" asks Rose, her Carla Bernstein instincts kicking in. Jeez, she sounds terse sometimes.

"Extinguisher. We have to carry them – by law." Edward answers levelly. His words from long ago circle my mind… *'I thank divine Providence every day that it was you that came to interview me, and not Rosalie Hale.'*

"Why didn't you call, or use the radio?" Esme asks.

Edward shakes his head. "With the electronics out, we had no radio. And I wasn't going risk turning them on, because of the threat of fire. GPS was still working on the Blackberry, so I was able to navigate to the nearest road. Took us four hours to walk there… Kate was in heels." Edward's mouth presses into a disapproving flat line. "We had no cell reception. There's no coverage at Gifford. Kate's battery died first. Mine dried up on the way."

Holy hell… I tense, and Edward pulls me into his lap.

"So how did you get back to Seattle?" Esme asks, blinking slightly… at the sight of the two of us, no doubt. I flush.

"We hitched, and pooled our resources. Between us, Kate and I had $600, and we bribed the truck driver to take us home. Took forever. He didn't have a cell – weird, but true. I didn't realise…" he stops, gazing at his family.

"That we'd worry?" Esme scoffs. "Oh, Edward!" she scolds him. "We've been going out of our minds!"

"You've made the news, bro…"

Edward rolls his eyes.

"Yeah… I figured that much when I arrived to this reception. I'm sorry, Mom – I should have asked the driver to stop so I could phone. But I was anxious to be back." He glances at Jake.

Oh… that's why! Because Jake is staying here. I frown at the thought. Jeez – all that worry…

Esme shakes her head.

"I'm just glad you're back in one piece, darling."

I start to relax, resting my head against his chest. He smells outdoorsy, and slightly sweaty, of body wash, and Edward… the most welcome scent in the whole world. Tears start to trickle slowly down my face again… tears of gratitude.

"Both engines?" Carlisle says again, shaking his head in disbelief.

"Go figure." Edward shrugs and runs his hand down my back.

"Hey," he whispers. He puts his fingers under my chin and tilts my head back. "Stop with the crying."

I wipe my nose with the back of my hand, in a most unladylike way.

"Stop with the disappearing," I sniff.

His lips quirk up.

"Electrical failure… that's odd, surely?" Carlisle says again.

"Yes, crossed my mind, too, Dad. But right now, I'd just like to go to bed, and think about all that shit tomorrow."

Rose pipes up. "Has anyone told the media The Edward Cullen has been found safe and well?"

"Angela will sort all that. Kate called her after I dropped her home."

"Yes, Angela called me to let me know you were still alive," grins Carlisle.

"I must give that woman a raise. Sure is late…" observes Edward.

"I think that's a hint, ladies and gentlemen, that my dear bro needs his beauty sleep," Emmett scoffs suggestively. Edward grimaces at him.

"Carlisle, my son is safe. You can take me home now."

"Yes. I think we could use the sleep."

"Stay," Edward offers.

"No, sweetheart, I want to get home. Now that I know you're safe."

Edward reluctantly eases me onto the couch and stands. Esme hugs him once more, pressing her head against his chest, closing her eyes… content. He wraps his arms around her.

"I was so worried, darling," she whispers.

"I'm okay, Mom."

She leans back and studies him intently while he holds her.

"Yes. I think you are," she says slowly, and glances at me and smiles… I flush.

We follow Carlisle and Esme as they make their way to the foyer. Behind me, I'm aware of Alice and Jasper having a whispered, heated conversation.

"No, Alice!" I can hear Jasper's exasperated refusal.

"Please, Jasper…" Alice pleads.

"Go home. Tomorrow, okay? Not tonight."

Hmmm… I turn. Alice is pouting at Jasper, and he's glaring at her. She folds her arms and turns on her heel… He rubs his forehead with one hand, obviously frustrated.

"Mom, Dad – wait for me," Alice calls sullenly.

Rose hugs me hard.

"I can tell some serious shit's been going down while I've been blissfully ignorant in Barbados. It's kinda obvious you two are nuts about each other. I'm so glad he's safe... Not just for him, Bella – for you, too."

"Thank you, Rose," I whisper, smiling shyly at Emmett, who's waiting for her by the elevator.

"Yeah… Who knew we'd find love at the same time?"

"With brothers!"

"We could end up sisters-in-law," she quips.

I tense, then mentally kick myself, as Rose stands back to gaze at me with her '*What aren't you telling me, Swan?'* look.

"Bella?"

I flush. Damn… should I tell her he's asked me?

"Come on, baby…" Emmett summons her – thank heavens.

"Let's talk tomorrow, Bella. You must be exhausted."

I am reprieved.

"Sure. You, too, Rose – you've traveled a long distance today."

We hug once more, then she and Emmett follow the Cullens into the elevator. Jasper shakes Edward's hand and gives me a quick hug… he looks distracted… and then they're gone.

Jake is hovering in the hallway as we come out of the foyer.

"Look. I'll turn in… leave you guys…"

I blush… jeez, why is this awkward?

"Do you know where to go?"

Jake nods.

"Yeah, Edward's err…housekeeper…"

"Mrs. Cope," I prompt.

"Yeah, Mrs. Cope… showed me earlier. Quite a place you have here, Edward."

"Thank you," Edward says politely as he comes to stand beside me, placing his arm around my shoulders. Leaning over, he kisses my hair. "I'm going to eat whatever Mrs. Cope has put out for me. Goodnight, Jake."

Edward wanders back into the great room, leaving Jake and me at the entrance.

Wow! Left alone with Jake…!

"Well… goodnight." Jake looks uncomfortable all of a sudden.

"Goodnight, Jake, and thank you for staying."

"Sure, Bells. Any time your rich, hotshot boyfriend goes missing – I'll be there."

"Jake!" I admonish him.

"Only kidding… Don't get mad. I'll be leaving early in the morning – I'll see you sometime, yeah? I've missed you."

"Sure, Jake. Soon, I hope. Sorry tonight was so… shit!" I smirk apologetically.

"Yeah…" he grins. "Shit."

He hugs me.

"Seriously, Bells, I'm glad you're happy… but I'm here if you need me."

I gaze up at him.

"Thank you."

He flashes me a sad, bittersweet smile, then he's off upstairs.

I turn back to the great room. Edward stands beside the couch, watching me, an unreadable expression on his face. We are finally alone... and we gaze at each other.

"He's still got it bad, you know," he murmurs.

"And how would you know that, Mr Cullen?"

"I recognize the symptoms, Miss Swan. I believe I have the same affliction."

"I thought I'd never see you again," I whisper. There – the words are out. All my worst fears packaged neatly in one short sentence… now exorcised.

"It wasn't as bad as it sounds."

I pick up his suit jacket and shoes from where they lie on the floor and move towards him.

"I'll take that," he whispers, reaching for his jacket.

Edward gazes down at me like I'm his reason for living… mirroring my look, I'm sure. *He is here… really here.*

He pulls me into his arms and wraps himself around me.

"Edward," I gasp, and my tears start anew.

"Hush," he soothes, kissing my hair. "You know, in the few seconds of sheer terror before I landed, all my thoughts were of you. You're my talisman, Bella."

"I thought I'd lost you," I breathe. We stand, holding each other, reconnecting, reassuring each other… and as I tighten my arms around him, I realise I'm still holding his shoes. I drop them noisily to the floor.

"Come and shower with me?" he murmurs.

"Okay." I glance up at him. I don't want to let go. Reaching down, he tilts my chin up with his fingers.

"You know… even tear-stained, you are beautiful, Bella Swan." He leans down and kisses me gently. "And your lips are so soft…" He kisses me again… deepening the kiss. Oh my… and to think… no… I stop thinking and surrender myself.

"I need to put my jacket down…"

"Drop it," I murmur against his lips.

"I can't."

I lean back to gaze up at him, puzzled. He smirks at me.

"This is why." From the inside breast pocket, he pulls out the small box containing my present I gave him. He slings the jacket over the back of the couch and places the box on top. *Oh my… Seize the day.* Well, it's after midnight… so technically it's his birthday.

"Open it," I whisper, and my heart starts pounding.

"I was hoping you'd say that," he murmurs. "This has been driving me crazy."

I grin impishly at him. Jeez, I feel giddy. He gives me his shy smile, and I melt, in spite of my thumping heart… delighting in his amused, yet intrigued, expression. With deft, long fingers, he unwraps and opens the box. His brow creases as he fishes out a small, rectangular plastic keychain, bearing a picture made up of tiny pixels that flash on and

off… an LED screen. It depicts the Seattle skyline, focusing on the Space Needle, with the word *SEATTLE* written boldly across the landscape, flashing on and off.

He stares at it for a moment, then gazes at me, bemused... a frown marring his lovely brow.

"Turn it over," I whisper, holding my breath.

He does, and his eyes shoot to mine, wide and green, alive with wonder and joy. His lips part slightly in disbelief.

The word *yes* flashes on and off on the keychain.

"Happy birthday," I whisper.

Chapter 85

"You'll marry me?" he whispers, incredulous.

I nod nervously, flushing and anxious, and not quite believing his reaction… this man whom I thought I'd lost. How could he not understand how much I love him?

"Say it," he orders softly, his gaze intense and hot.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

He inhales sharply and moves suddenly, grabbing me and swinging me round in a most unFiftylike manner. He's laughing, young and carefree, radiating joyful elation. I grab his arms to hold on, feeling his muscles ripple beneath my fingers, and I'm caught up in his infectious laughter – dizzy, addled, a girl totally and utterly smitten with her beautiful man. He puts me down and kisses me. Hard. His hands are on either side of my face, his tongue insistent, persuasive… arousing.

"Oh Bella," he breathes against my lips and it's an exultation that leaves me reeling. He loves me – of that I have no doubt – and I savor the taste of this delicious man, this man I thought I might never see again. His joy is evident – his eyes shining, his youthful smile – and his … relief – it's almost palpable.

"I thought I'd lost you," I murmur, still dazzled and breathless from his kiss.

"Baby, it will take more than a malfunctioning 135 to keep me away from you."

"135?"

"Echo Charlie. She's a Eurocopter 135, the safest in its class."

Some unnamed but dark emotion crosses his face briefly, distracting me. What isn't he saying? Before I can ask him, he stills and looks down at me, frowning slightly, and for a moment I think he's going to tell me. I blink up into his speculative green eyes.

"Wait a minute. You gave this to me before we saw Banner," he says, holding up the key ring. He looks almost horrified.

Oh dear… where's he going with this? I nod slowly, keeping a very straight face.

His mouth drops open.

I shrug apologetically.

"I wanted you to know that whatever Banner said, it wouldn't make a difference to me. I decided it didn't matter," I breathe.

Edward blinks at me in disbelief.

"So all yesterday evening, when I was begging you for an answer, I already had it?" I can hear the dismay in his voice.

I nod again, trying desperately to gauge his reaction. He gazes at me in stupefied wonder, but then narrows his eyes and his mouth twists with amused irony.

"All that worry…" he whispers ominously.

I grin at him and shrug once more.

"Oh, don't try and get cute with me, Miss Swan. Right now, I want…" he runs his hand through his hair, then shakes his head and changes tack.

"I can't believe you left me hanging." His whisper is laced with disbelief.

His expression alters subtly, his green eyes gleaming wickedly, his mouth twitching into a carnal smile.

Holy Crow. I feel a thrill run through me. What's he thinking…?

"I believe some retribution is in order, Miss Swan," he says softly.

Retribution! Oh shit! I know he's playing – but nevertheless, I take a cautious step back from him.

He grins.

"Is that the game?" he whispers. "Because I will catch you." And his eyes burn with a bright playful intensity. "And you're biting your lip…" he says threateningly. All of my insides tighten at once. *Oh… my.* My future husband wants to play. Okay… I take another step back, then turn to run – but in vain. Edward grabs me, and in one easy swoop – while I squeal with delight, surprise and shock – he hoists me over his shoulder and heads out of the Great Room.

"Edward!" I hiss, mindful that Jake is upstairs – though whether he could hear us is doubtful. I steady myself by clasping his lower back, then on a brave impulse, I swat his behind. He swats me right back.

"Ow!" I yelp.

"Shower time," he declares triumphantly.

"Put me down!" I try and fail to sound disapproving. My struggle is futile – his arm is firmly clamped over my thighs – and for some reason I cannot stop giggling.

"Fond of these shoes?" he asks as he opens the door to his bathroom. I can hear the amusement in his voice.

"I prefer them to be touching the floor!" I attempt to snarl at him, but it's not very effective, as I can't keep the laughter out of my voice.

"Your wish is my command, Miss Swan."

Without putting me down, he slips off both of my shoes and lets them clatter to the tile floor. Pausing by the vanity unit, he empties his pockets – dead Blackberry, keys, wallet… the key-ring. I can only imagine what I look like in the mirror from this angle. When he's finished, he marches directly into his over-large shower cubicle.

"Edward!" I scold loudly – his intent is now clear.

He switches the water on at max. Jeez…! Chilly water spurts over my backside, and I squeal – then stop, mindful once more that Jake is above us. It's cold and I'm fully clothed, and the cold water is soaking and spreading into my dress, my panties, my bra… it's all sodden and wrong… and very funny.

"No!" I squeal, and I really can't stop giggling as the water warms up. "Put me down!" I swat him again, harder this time, and Edward releases me, letting me slide down his now soaked body… his white shirt stuck to his chest – his suit pants, sodden. I am soaked, too, flushed, giddy and breathless, and he's grinning down at me, looking so… so unbelievably hot.

He sobers, his eyes shining, and cups my face again, drawing my lips to his. His kiss is gentle, cherishing, and totally distracting. I no longer care that I am fully clothed and soaking wet in Edward's shower cubicle. It's just the two of us beneath the cascading water. He's back, he's safe, he's mine.

My hands move involuntarily to his shirt as it clings to every line and sinew of his chest. I can see the hair scrunched beneath the white wetness… I yank the shirt hem out of his pants, and he groans against my mouth, but his lips do not leave mine. As I start unbuttoning his shirt, he reaches round to the zipper at the back of my dress and slowly starts to undo it… his lips becoming more insistent, more provocative… his tongue invading my mouth… and suddenly my body explodes with desire. I tug his shirt hard, and the buttons fly off and are lost in the shower, and I'm pulling it off his shoulders, hampering

his attempts to undress me. I press him into the wall of the shower… his hands are trapped in the cuffs of his shirt.

"Cufflinks," he murmurs.

With scrambling fingers, I release first one cuff, and then the other, letting his gold cufflinks fall carelessly to the tiled floor. He gazes down at me through the cascading water, his gaze burning, carnal, heated like the water. He pulls off his shirt. I reach for the waistband of his pants, but he shakes his head, and suddenly, grabbing my shoulders, spins me round so I am facing away from him. He finishes the long journey south with my dress zipper, then smooths my wet hair away from my neck, running his tongue up my neck to my hairline and back again… kissing and sucking as he goes.

I moan… and very slowly, he pushes my dress off my shoulders, peeling it down past my breasts, and his lips move to my shoulder. He unclasps my bra, and it joins his cufflinks, shirt, and buttons on the shower floor. His hands reach round and cup my breasts as he murmurs his appreciation near my ear.

"So beautiful," he whispers.

Now my arms are trapped by my dress, which hangs at my waist… still in their sleeves… but my hands are free. I roll my head, giving Edward better access to my neck, push my breasts into his caressing, magical hands, and reach round behind me. I hear his sharp intake of breath as my inquisitive fingers make contact with his erection. He pushes his groin into my welcoming hands. Dammit… why didn't he let me take his pants off?

He tugs on my nipples, and as they stretch and elongate under his expert touch, all thoughts of his pants disappear, and pleasure spikes, sharp and libidinous, in my belly… *oh my*... I lean my head back against him and groan.

"Yes," he breathes and turns me once more, capturing my mouth with his.

He peels my dress down further, but it sticks to me because it's so wet now… yet he persists, and it's soon a soggy heap, with my panties, on the floor of the shower. With my hands free, I grab the body wash beside us. Edward stills as he realizes what I am about to do.

Staring him straight in the eye, I squirt some of the sweet-smelling gel into my palm and hold my hand up in front of his chest… waiting for an answer to my unspoken question. His eyes widen ever so slightly, then he gives me an almost imperceptible nod… and very gently, I place my hand on his sternum, and start to rub the soap into his skin. I hear the sharp inhalation of his breath and he stands very still. After a beat, his hands clasp my hips… but he doesn't push me away. He watches me warily, his look intense more than scared, but his mouth is open slightly as his breathing increases.

"Is this okay?" I whisper.

"Yes." His short breathy reply is almost a gasp.

I am reminded of the many showers we've had together… but the one at the Olympic, that's a bittersweet memory. Well, now I can touch him. I raise my other hand and work them in gentle circles, cleaning my man… moving to his underarms, over his ribs, down his flat firm belly, towards his happy trail… and the start of his pants.

"My turn," he whispers, and reaching for the shampoo, squirts some on to the top of my head, shifting us out of range of the stream of water.

I think this is my cue to stop washing him, so I hook my fingers into the waistband of his pants. He starts to work the shampoo in… oh my. His firm, long fingers massaging my scalp… I close my eyes and give myself over to the heavenly sensation. After all the stress of the evening, this is just what I need. I groan in appreciation… and I can feel him relax. I cock open one eye, and he's smiling down at me.

"You like?"

"Hmmm…"

He grins.

"Me, too," he says and leans over to kiss my forehead, his fingers continuing their sweet, firm kneading of my scalp.

"Turn around," he says authoritatively.

I do as I'm told, and his fingers slowly work over my head, cleansing, healing… loving me as they go. Oh, this is bliss… He reaches for more shampoo, and gently washes the long tresses down my back. When he's finished, he drags me back under the cascade. "Lean your head back," he orders quietly. I willingly comply, and he carefully rinses out the suds… When he's done, I face him once more and make a beeline for his pants.

"I want to wash all of you," I whisper, flushing slightly.

He smiles that lopsided smile, and lifts his hands in a gesture that says, *I'm all yours, baby*… and I grin at him, feeling like it's Christmas. I make short work of his zipper, and shortly, his pants and boxers join the rest of the clothing on the shower floor. I stand and reach for the body wash and the fresh water sponge.

"Looks like you're pleased to see me," I murmur dryly.

"I'm always pleased to see you, Miss Swan," he smirks at me.

I soap the sponge, then retrace my journey over his chest. He's more relaxed – maybe because I'm not actually touching him. I head south with the sponge… across his belly, along the happy trail… through his pubic hair… over and up his erection.

I peek up at him, and his hooded eyes regard me with sensual longing. *Hmmm…* I like this look. I drop the sponge and use my hands, grasping him firmly… he closes his eyes, tips his head back, and groans…

Oh yes! It's so arousing. My inner goddess has resurfaced – after her evening of rocking and weeping in the corner – and she's wearing harlot-red lipstick.

His burning eyes suddenly lock with mine. He's remembered something.

"It's Saturday," he breathes, eyes alight with salacious wonder, and he grasps my waist, pulling me to him and kissing me savagely. *Whoa – change of pace!* His hands sweep down my slick wet body, around to my sex, his fingers exploring, teasing, and his mouth is relentless, leaving me breathless, his other hand in my wet hair, holding me in place while I bear the full force of his passion unleashed. His fingers move inside me.

"Ahh…" I groan into his mouth.

"Yes," he hisses, and lifts me, his hands beneath my backside. "Wrap your legs around me, baby."

My legs fold around him, and I cling like a limpet to his neck. He braces me against the wall of the shower and pauses, gazing down at me.

"Eyes open," he murmurs. "I want to see you."

I blink up at him, my heart hammering, my blood pulsing hot and heavy through my body… desire real and rampant through me… and very slowly, he eases into me, filling me, claiming me, skin against skin. I push down against him and groan loudly. Once fully inside me, he pauses once more, his face strained, intense.

"You are mine, Isabella," he whispers.

"Always…"

He smiles victoriously at me, and shifts, making me gasp.

"And now we can let everyone know, because you said yes." His voice is reverential, and he leans down, capturing my mouth with his, and starts to move... slow and sweet… *oh*

my! I close my eyes and tilt my head back as my body bows, my will submitting to his, slave to his intoxicating slow rhythm.

His teeth graze my jaw, my chin, and down my neck as he picks up the pace, pushing me onwards, upwards… away from this earthly plane, the teeming shower, the evening's chilling fright… it's just me and my man – moving in unison – moving as one – each completely absorbed in the other, our gasps and grunts mingling. And I revel in the exquisite feeling of his possession, as my body blooms and flowers around him.

I could have lost him… and I love him… I love this man so much. I will spend the rest of my life loving him… and with that awe-inspiring thought, I detonate around him – a healing, cathartic, exhausting orgasm. I cry out his name, tears flowing down my cheeks, so overcome am I by the enormity of my love for him, the depth of my commitment to him. He, too, reaches his climax and pours himself into me, his face buried in my neck… and sinks to the floor, holding me tightly, kissing my face, kissing away my tears, as the warm water spills down around us, washing us clean.

"My fingers are pruny," I murmur, post-coital and sated as I lean against his chest. He raises my fingers to his lips and kisses each in turn.

"We should really get out of this shower."

"I'm comfortable here." I am in his lap and he's holding me close.

Edward murmurs his assent. I suddenly feel bone tired… world-weary. So much has happened this last week – enough for a lifetime of drama – and now I'm getting *married*... a disbelieving giggle escapes my lips.

"Something amusing you, Miss Swan?" he asks fondly.

"It's been a busy week…"

He grins.

"That it has."

"I thank God you're back in one piece, Mr Cullen," I whisper… sobering at the thought of what might have been.

He tenses slightly, and I immediately regret reminding him.

"I was scared," he confesses, much to my surprise.

"Earlier…?"

He nods, his expression serious… holy shit.

"So you made light of it to reassure your family?"

"Yes. I was too low to land well. But somehow I did."

Holy shit. My eyes sweep up to his, and he looks grave as the water cascades over us.

"How close a call was it?"

He gazes down at me.

"Close," he pauses. "For a few awful seconds… I thought I'd never see you again."

I hug him tightly.

"I can't imagine my life without you, Edward. I love you so much it frightens me."

"Me, too," he breathes. "You are my life now. I love you so much." His arms tighten around me, and he nuzzles my hair. "I won't ever let you go."

"I don't want to go, ever." I kiss his neck, and he leans down and kisses me gently.

After a moment, he shifts.

"Come – let's get you dry and into bed. I'm exhausted, and you look beat."

I lean back and arch an eyebrow at his choice of words. He cocks his head to one side and smirks at me.

"You have something to say, Miss Swan?"

I shake my head and clamber unsteadily to my feet.

I am sitting up in bed. Edward insisted on drying my hair… he's quite skilled at it. How he got to be is an unpleasant thought, so I dismiss it immediately. It's after 2:00 in the morning, and I am ready to sleep. Edward gazes down at me, and re-examines the key ring before climbing into bed. He shakes his head, incredulous once more.

"This is so neat. The best birthday present I've ever had." He glances at me, his eyes soft and warm. "Better than my signed Guiseppe DeNatale poster."

"I would have told you earlier, but as it was your birthday… what do you give the man who has everything? I thought I'd give you… me."

He puts the key ring down on the bedside table and snuggles up beside me, pulling me into his arms against his chest so we're spooning.

"It's perfect. Like you."

I smirk, though he can't see my expression.

"I am far from perfect, Edward."

"Are you smirking at me, Miss Swan?"

How does he know?

"Maybe," I giggle. "Can I ask you something?

"Of course," he nuzzles my neck.

"You didn't call on your trip back from Portland. Was that really because of Jake? You were worried about me being here, alone with him?"

Edward says nothing. I turn to face him, and his eyes are wide as I reproach him.

"Do you know how ridiculous that is? How much stress you put your family and me through? We all love you very much."

He blinks at me… then gives me his shy smile.

"I had no idea you'd all be so worried."

I purse my lips at him.

"When are you going to get it through your thick skull that you are *loved?*"

His eyebrows widen in surprise. "Thick skull?"

I nod. "Thick skull."

He's trying to make me laugh. To distract me.

"I don't think the bone density of my head is significantly higher than anywhere else in my body."

"I'm serious! Stop trying to make me laugh. I am still a little mad at you… though that's partially eclipsed by the fact that you're home safe and sound when I thought…" My voice fades as I recall those anxious few hours. "Well, you know what I thought."

His eyes soften, and he reaches up to caress my face. "I'm sorry. Okay."

"Your poor Mom, too. It was very moving, seeing you with her," I whisper.

He smiles shyly. "I've never seen her that way." He blinks at the memory. "Yes… that was really something. She's normally so self possessed. It was quite a shock."

I smile at him. "See? Everyone loves you. Perhaps now you'll start believing it."

I lean down and kiss him gently.

"Happy Birthday, Edward. I'm glad you're here to share your day with me."

He smiles.

"And you haven't seen what I've got for you tomorrow!" I smirk.

"There's more?" he says, astounded, and his face erupts into a breathtaking grin.

"Oh yes, Mr Cullen… but you'll have to wait until then."

I wake suddenly from a dream – or nightmare – and my pulse is thumping. I turn, panicked – and to my relief, Edward is fast asleep beside me. Because I've shifted, he stirs and reaches out in his sleep, draping his arm over me, and rests his head on my shoulder, sighing softly.

The room is flooded with light. It's 8:00 am… Edward never sleeps this late.

I lie back and let my racing heart calm. Why the anxiety? Is it the aftermath of last night? I turn and stare at him. He's here, he's safe. I take a deep steadying breath and gaze at his lovely face. A face that is now so familiar… all its dips and shadows eternally etched on my mind. He looks so much younger when he's asleep… and I grin, because today he's a whole year older. I hug myself, thinking about my present. Oooh… what will he do?

Perhaps I should start by bringing him breakfast in bed… besides, Jake may still be here.

I find Jake at the counter, eating a bowl of cereal. I can't help but flush when I see him. He knows I've spent the night with Edward… why do I suddenly feel so shy? It's not like I'm naked or anything… I'm wearing my silk floor-length wrap.

"Morning, Jake," I smile, brazening it out.

"Hey, Bells!" His face lights up, genuinely pleased to see me, and I can see no hint of teasing or anything salacious in his expression.

"Sleep well?" I ask.

"Sure. Some view from up here."

"Yeah. It's pretty special." Like the owner of this apartment. "Want a real man's breakfast?" I tease.

"Love some."

"It's Edward's birthday today – I'm making him breakfast in bed."

"He awake?"

"No, I think he's fried from yesterday." I quickly glance away from him, and head to the fridge so he can't see my blush… jeez… it's only Jake.

When I take the eggs and bacon out of the fridge, Jake is grinning at me. "You really like him, don't you?"

I purse my lips. "I love him, Jake."

Jake blinks, momentarily stumped, then recovers himself. "What's not to love?" he gestures round the great room.

I scowl at him. "Gee, thanks!" I snap.

"Hey, Bells, just kidding."

Hmmm… will I always have this leveled at me? That I'm marrying Edward for his money?

"Seriously, Bells, I'm kidding. You've never been that kind of girl."

"Omelet good for you?" I ask, changing the subject. I don't want to argue.

"Sure."

"And me," Edward says as he saunters into the great room. *Holy fuck…* he's wearing only pajama bottoms, that hang… in that totally hot way off his hips… jeez.

"Jake." He nods.

"Edward." Jake returns his nod solemnly.

Edward turns to me and smirks as I stare. He's done this on purpose. I narrow my eyes at him, desperately trying to recover my equilibrium, and Edward's expression alters subtly. He's wary… he knows I know what he's up to.

"I was going to bring you breakfast in bed."

Swaggering over, he wraps his arm around me, tilts my chin up, and plants a loud, wet kiss on my lips. Very unFifty!

"Good morning, Isabella," he says.

I want to scowl at him and tell him to behave – but it's his birthday! I flush. Why is he so territorial?

"Good morning, Edward. Happy Birthday," I give him a smile… and he smirks at me.

"I'm looking forward to my other present," he says – and that's it… I flush the color of my old truck, and glance nervously at Jake… who looks like he's swallowed something particularly bitter. I turn away and start preparing the food.

"So what are your plans today, Jake?" Edward asks, seemingly casual as he sits down on a bar-stool.

"I'm heading up to see my dad and Charlie, Bella's dad – we're going on a fishing trip."

"Fishing?" Edward is genuinely surprised.

"Yeah – some great catches in these coastal waters. The steelheads can grow way big."

They're talking *fishing…*? What is it about fishing? I have never understood it.

"True. My brother Emmett and I landed a 34 pound steelhead once."

"Thirty-four pounds? Not bad. Bella's father though, he holds the record. A 43 pounder."

"You're kidding! He never said."

"Happy Birthday, by the way."

"Thanks. So, where do you like to fish?"

I zone out… this I do not need to know. But at the same time, I'm relieved. See, Edward? Jake's not so bad.

By the time Jake makes to leave, both of them are much more relaxed with each other. Edward quickly changes into t-shirt and jeans, and barefoot, he accompanies Jake and me to the foyer.

"Well, thanks for letting me crash here," Jake says to Edward as they shake hands.

"Anytime," Edward smiles.

Jake hugs me quickly. "Stay safe, Bells."

"Sure. Great to see you."

He waves at us from inside the elevator… and then he's gone.

"See, he's not so bad."

"He still wants into your panties, Bella. But can't say I blame him."

"Edward, that's not true!"

He smirks down at me. "You have no idea, do you? He's a wolf in sheep's clothing."

I frown. "Edward, he's my friend, and that cliché does not apply in this case."

Edward holds up his hands in a placating gesture. "I don't want to fight," he says softly.

Oh! We're not fighting… are we?

"Me neither."

"You didn't tell him we were getting married."

"No. I figured I ought to tell my parents first."

Shit... It's the first time I've thought about this since I said yes. Jeez – what are my parents going to say?

Edward nods. "Yes, you're right. And I… err, I should ask your father."

I laugh. "Oh Edward – this isn't Pride and Prejudice!"

Holy shit… what will Charlie say? The thought of that conversation fills me with horror.

Edward shrugs. "It's traditional."

"Let's talk about that later. I want to give you your other present." My aim is to distract him. The thought of my present is burning a hole in my consciousness anyway… I need to give it to him and see how he reacts.

He blinks at me, and gives me his shy smile, and my heart skips a beat. For as long as I live, I'll never tire of looking at that smile… Jeez… or at his face.

"You're biting your lip," he says, and reaches out to pull at my chin. I feel a thrill as his fingers touch me.

Without a word, and while I still have a modicum of courage, I take his hand and lead him back to the bedroom. I drop his hand, leaving him standing by the bed, and from under my side of the bed, I take out the two remaining gift boxes.

"Two?" he says, surprised.

I take a deep breath. "I bought this before the… incident yesterday. I'm not sure about it now."

I quickly hand him one of the boxes before I can change my mind. He gazes at me, puzzled, sensing my uncertainty.

"Sure you want me to open it?"

I nod. Anxiety is beginning to radiate through me. Edward tears off the packaging… and gazes in surprise at the box.

"Echo Charlie," I whisper.

He grins. The box contains a small wooden helicopter with a large, solar-powered rotor blade. He opens it up…

"Solar powered," he murmurs. "Wow…" And before I know it he's sitting on the bed assembling it.

It snaps together quickly, and Edward holds it up in the palm of his hand. A blue, wooden helicopter. He looks up at me and treats me to his glorious, all- American boy smile, then heads to the window so that the little helicopter is bathed in sunlight… and the rotor starts to spin.

"Look at that," he breathes, examining it closely. "What we can already do with this technology…" He holds it at eye-level, watching the blades spin. He's fascinated… I can see him zone out and lose himself in it. Jeez! What is he thinking? I have been holding my breath for what feels like hours. Now I breathe a large sigh of relief.

"You like it?"

"Bella, I love it. Thank you." He grabs me and kisses me swiftly, then turns back to watch the rotor spin. "I'll add it to the glider in my office," he says distractedly, watching the blade spin. He moves his hand out of the sunlight… the blade slows down and comes to a stop.

I can't help my face-splitting grin and I want to hug myself. He loves it. Of course, he's all about alternative technologies… I'd forgotten that, in my haste to buy it. Placing it on the chest of drawers, he turns to face me.

"It'll keep me company while we salvage Echo Charlie."

"Is it salvageable?"

"I don't know. I hope so. I'll miss her, otherwise."

Her? I am shocked at myself for the small pang of jealousy I feel – for an inanimate object? My subconscious snorts with derisory laughter. I ignore her.

"What's in the other box?" he asks, his eyes wide with almost childish excitement.

Holy fuck…

"I'm not sure if this present is for you or me."

"Really?" he asks, and I know I have piqued his interest.

Nervously, I hand him the second box. He shakes it gently, and we both hear a heavy rattle. He glances up at me.

"Why are you so nervous?" he asks, bemused.

I shrug, embarrassed and excited. I can feel my flush as it creeps up my cheeks. He raises an eyebrow at me.

"You have me intrigued, Miss Swan," he whispers, and his voice runs right through me… desire and anticipation spawning in my belly. "I have to say I'm enjoying your reaction. What have you been up to, Bella?" He narrows his eyes speculatively. I remain tight-lipped, as once more I stop breathing.

He removes the lid of the box and takes out a small card. The rest of the contents are wrapped in tissue. He opens the card, and his eyes dart quickly to mine – widening… with shock, surprise… I just don't know.

"Do rude things to you?" he breathes.

I nod and swallow. He cocks his head to one side warily, assessing my reaction, frowning slightly. Then turns his attention back to the box. He tears through the pale blue tissue paper and fishes out an eye mask, some nipple clamps, a butt plug, his iPod, his silver tie… and last, but by no means least, the key to his playroom.

He gazes up at me, his expression dark, unreadable. *Oh shit*... is this a bad move…?

"You want to play?" he asks softly.

"Yes," I breathe.

"For my birthday?"

"Yes." Could my voice sound any smaller?

A myriad of emotions cross his face, none of which I can place, but he settles for slightly anxious. *Hmmm*...Not quite the reaction I was expecting.

"You're sure?" he asks.

"Not the whips and stuff."

"I understand that."

"Yes, then. I'm sure."

He shakes his head and gazes down at the contents of the box.

"Sex mad and insatiable... Well, I think we can do something with this lot," he murmurs almost to himself, as he puts the contents back in the box.

When he glances at me again, his expression has completely changed. *Holy crow…* his green eyes burn, and his mouth lifts in a slow erotic smile. He holds out his hand.

"Now," he says, and it's not a request.

My belly clenches, tight and hard, deep, deep down.

I put my hand in his.

"Come," he orders, and I follow him out of the room… my heart in my mouth, desire racing slick and hot through my blood, my insides taut with hungry anticipation.

My inner goddess somersaults round her chaise longue… *Finally!*

Chapter 86

Edward pauses outside the playroom. “You’re sure about this?” he asks, his gaze heated yet anxious.

“Yes,” I murmur, smiling shyly at him.

His eyes soften. “Anything you don’t want to do?”

I am derailed by his question. I blink up at him as my mind goes into overdrive… and one thought occurs.

“I don’t want you to take photos of me.”

He stills, and his expression hardens as he cocks his head to one side and eyes me speculatively… *oh shit*. I think he’s going to ask me why, but fortunately he doesn’t.

“Okay,” he murmurs. His brow furrows as he unlocks the door, then stands aside to usher me into the room. I feel his eyes on me as he follows me inside and closes the door behind him.

Placing the gift box on the chest of drawers, he takes out the iPod, switches it on, then waves at the music center on the wall so that the smoked glass doors glide silently open. He presses some buttons, and after a moment the sound of a subway train echoes round the room. He turns it down so that the slow, hypnotic electronic beat that follows becomes ambient… a woman starts to sing, I don’t know who… her voice is soft yet rasping… and the beat is measured, deliberate… erotic. *Oh my*… music to make love to…

Edward turns to face me as I stand in the middle of the room, my heart pounding, my blood singing in my veins – pulsing, or so it feels, in time to the music’s seductive beat. He saunters casually over to me and pulls at my chin so I’m no longer biting my lip.

“What do you want to do, Isabella?” he murmurs, planting a soft, chaste kiss at the corner of my mouth, his fingers still grasping my chin.

“It’s your birthday. Whatever you want,” I whisper.

He traces his thumb along my lower lip, his brow creased once more. “Are we in here because you think *I* want to be in here?”

I gaze at him, and he regards me intently. “No,” I whisper. “I want to be in here, too.”

His gaze darkens, growing bolder, as he assesses my response… He's so alluring… After what seems an age he speaks.

"Oh… there are so many possibilities." His voice is low, excited. "But let's start with getting you naked." He pulls the sash of my robe so that it falls open, revealing my silk nightdress… then steps back and sits nonchalantly down on the arm of the Chesterfield couch.

"Take your clothes off. Slowly." The sensual, challenging look he gives me… *oh my*… I swallow compulsively, pressing my thighs together… I can feel the damp between my legs. My inner goddess is already stripped naked and standing in line, begging me to play catch-up. I pull the robe away from my shoulders, my eyes never leaving his, and let it fall to the floor. His mesmerizing green eyes heat, and he runs his index finger over his lips as he gazes at me…

I slip the spaghetti straps of my gown off my shoulders and release them. My nightdress skims and ripples softly down my body, pooling at my feet… I am naked and practically panting. *Jeez*... and he hasn't even touched me yet. Edward pauses for a moment, and I marvel at the frankly carnal appreciation in his expression. Standing up, he makes his way over to the chest and picks up his pale silver grey tie… my favorite tie. He pulls it through his fingers as he turns to face me, and strolls casually back… a slight smile playing on his lips. When he stands in front of me, I expect him to ask for my hands, but he doesn't…

"I think you're underdressed, Miss Swan," he murmurs. He places the tie around my neck, and agonizingly slowly, dexterously ties it in what I assume is a fine Windsor knot. As he tightens the knot his fingers brush the base of my throat, and electricity shoots through me, making me gasp. He leaves the wide end of the tie long… its tip skims my pubic hair.

"You look mighty fine now, Miss Swan," he says softly, and bends to kiss me gently on my lips. It's a swift kiss, and I want more, desire spiraling wantonly round my body. "What shall we do with you now?" he says, then picking up the tie, yanks sharply, so that I'm forced forward into his arms… and his hands dive into my hair and pull my head back, and he really kisses me, hard, his tongue unforgiving and merciless… and one of his hands roams freely down my back to cup my behind. When he pulls away, he's panting, too, and gazing down at me, his eyes molten green… and I'm left wanting, my wits thoroughly scattered, gasping for breath… I'm sure my lips will be swollen after his sensual assault.

"Turn around," he orders gently, and I obey. Pulling my hair free of the tie, he quickly plaits it and secures it. He tugs the plait so my head tilts up.

"You have beautiful hair, Isabella," he murmurs, and kisses my throat, sending shivers running up and down my spine.

"You just have to say stop. You know that, don't you?" he whispers against my throat.

I nod, my eyes closed, relishing his lips on me.

He turns me round once more and picks up the end of the tie. “Come,” he says, tugging gently, leading me over to the chest where the rest of the box’s contents are on display.

“Isabella, these objects…” He holds up the butt plug. “This is a size too big. As an anal virgin, you don’t want to start with this. We want to start… with this.” He holds up his pinky finger, and I gasp, shocked. Fingers…*there?*

He smirks at me, and the unpleasant thought of the anal fisting mentioned in the contract comes to mind.

“Just finger – singular,” he says softly, with that uncanny ability he has to read my mind. My eyes dart to his. How does he do that?

“These clamps are vicious.” He prods the nipple clamps. “We'll use these.” He places a different pair of clamps on the chest. They look like giant black hairpins, but with little jet jewels hanging down. “They're adjustable,” Edward murmurs, his voice laced with gentle concern.

I blink up at him, wide-eyed. Edward, my sexual mentor... Jeez, he knows so much more about all this than I do… I’ll never catch up. I frown slightly. He knows more than me about so many things… except cooking.

“Clear?” he asks.

“Yes,” I whisper, my mouth dry. “Are you going to tell me what you intend to do?”

“No. I’m making this up as I go along. This isn’t a scene, Bella.”

“How should I behave?”

His brow creases at me. “However you want to.”

Oh!

“Were you expecting my alter ego, Isabella?” he asks, his voice vaguely mocking.

I blink at him. “Well… yes,” I murmur.

He smiles his private smile and reaches up to run his thumb down my cheek. “I’m your lover, Isabella. I love to hear your laugh and your girlish giggle. I like you relaxed and happy, like you are in Jake’s photos. That’s the girl that fell into my office. That’s the girl I fell in love with.”

Holy crow… I think my mouth drops open, and a welcome warmth blossoms in my heart… it's joy – pure joy.

"But having said all that – I also like to do rude things to you, Miss Swan, as requested by your good self. So, do as you're told and turn round." His eyes glint wickedly, and the joy moves sharply south, seizing me tightly and gripping everything below my waist. I hear him open one of the drawers, and a moment later, he's in front of me again.

"Come," he orders softly, and tugging on the tie, leads me to the table. As we walk past the couch, I notice for the first time that all the canes have vanished. It distracts me. Were they there yesterday when I came in? I don't remember… Did Edward move them? Mrs. Cope?

Edward interrupts my train of thought. "I want you to kneel up on this," he says when we're at the table.

Oh… okay. What does he have in mind? My inner goddess can't wait to find out – she's already scissor-kicked on to the table and is watching him with adoration. He gently lifts me on to the table, and I fold my legs beneath me and kneel in front of him, surprised by my own grace. Now we are eye to eye. He runs his hands down my thighs, grasps my knees, and pulls my legs apart so he can stand between them. He looks very serious, his eyes darker, hooded… lustful.

"Arms behind your back. I am going to cuff you."

He produces some leather cuffs from his back pocket and reaches round me. This is it… where's he going to take me this time? As he leans round me, his proximity is intoxicating. This man is going to be my husband… Can one lust after one's husband like this? I don't remember reading about that anywhere… I just can't resist him, and I lean forward and run my parted lips along his jaw… feeling the stubble, a heady combination of prickly and soft, under my tongue. He stills and closes his eyes… his breathing increases and he pulls back suddenly.

"Stop. Or this will be over far quicker than either of us want," he warns. For a moment, I think he might be angry… but then he smiles, and his heated eyes are alight with amusement.

"You're irresistible," I pout.

"Am I now?" he says dryly.

I nod.

"Well – don't distract me, or I'll gag you."

“I like distracting you,” I whisper, looking mulishly at him, and he cocks his eyebrow at me.

“Or spank you.”

Oh!

I try and hide my smile. There was a time, not very long ago, when I would have been terrified by this threat. I’d never have had the nerve to kiss him, unbidden, while he was in this room. Now, I realize, I’m no longer intimidated by him… it’s a revelation.

I grin mischievously at him, and he smirks at me.

“Behave,” he reprimands me, and stands back, gazing at me, slapping the leather cuffs across his palm… And the warning is there, implicit in his actions.

I try for contrite, and I think I succeed. He approaches me again.

“That’s better,” he breathes and leans behind me once more with the cuffs. I resist touching him, but inhale his glorious Edward scent, still fresh from last night’s shower. Holy crow… I should bottle this… *hmmm*.

I expect him to cuff my wrists, but he attaches each cuff above my elbows. It makes me arch my back slightly, pushing my breasts forward, though my elbows are by no means together. I can feel the leather strap across my back. When he's finished, he stands back to admire me.

“Feel okay?” he asks.

It’s not the most comfortable of positions… but I’m so wired with anticipation to see where he’s going with this, that I nod, weak with wanting.

“Good.” He pulls the mask from his back pocket. “I think you've seen enough now,” he murmurs. He slides the mask over my head, covering my eyes.

My breathing spikes. Wow… Why is not being able to see so erotic? I am here, trussed up and kneeling, on a table. Waiting... anticipation hot and heavy deep in my belly. I can still hear, though, and the melodic steady beat of the track continues. I feel it resonating through my body… I hadn’t noticed before. He must have it on repeat.

Edward steps away. *What is he doing?* He’s moving around, back to the chest… opens another drawer, then closes it again. A moment later, he’s back. I can sense him between my legs, and I can smell something new... a pungent, rich, musky scent. It’s delicious… almost mouth-watering.

"I don't want to ruin my favorite tie," he murmurs softly. It slowly unravels as he pulls it gently off me. I inhale sharply as I feel it travel up my body, tickling me in its wake.

Ruin his tie? I listen acutely to try and determine what he's doing. I think he's rubbing his hands together. His knuckles suddenly brush over my cheek, down to my jaw, following my jawline. My body leaps to attention as his touch sends shivers through me. His hand flexes over my neck, and it's slick with the sweet-smelling oil, so it glides smoothly down my throat, across my clavicle and up to my shoulder, his fingers kneading gently as they go. Oh… I'm getting a massage. Not what I expected. He places his other hand on my other shoulder, and begins another slow teasing journey across my clavicle. I groan softly as he works his way down towards my increasingly aching breasts… aching for his touch. It's so tantalizing… I arch my body into his deft touch. His hands glide to my sides, slow and measured, in time to the beat of the music... studiously avoiding my breasts. I groan, but I don't know if its from pleasure or frustration.

"You are so beautiful, Bella," he murmurs, his voice low and husky, his mouth next to my ear. His nose follows along my jaw as he continues to massage me… beneath my breasts… across my belly… down… he kisses me fleetingly on my lips, then he runs his nose down my neck... my throat. Holy cow, I'm on fire… his nearness, his hands, his words...

"And soon you'll be my wife… to have and to hold," he whispers.

Oh…my…

"To love and to cherish…"

Jeez…

"With my body, I shall worship you."

I tip my head back and moan. His fingers run through my pubic hair, over my sex, and he rubs the palm of his hand against my clitoris.

"Mrs. Cullen…" he whispers as he eases his fingers into me… and I moan, loudly, appreciatively.

"Yes," he breathes as his fingers move, round and round, in and out… "Open your mouth."

My mouth is already open with panting. I open it further and he slips a large, cool, metal object between my lips. Shaped like an over-sized baby's pacifier, it has small grooves or carvings, and what feels like a chain at the end. It's big…

"Suck," he commands softly. "I'm going to put this inside you."

Inside me? Inside me *where*…? My heart lurches into my mouth. Edward removes whatever it is, and still kissing my neck, slides the object into me – much to my relief, in the usual place… supplanting his absent fingers. He cups my face and kisses me, his mouth invading mine, and I hear a very faint click.

I gasp. Instantly, the item inside me starts to vibrate –*down there…!* I gasp again. The feeling is – extraordinary… beyond anything I've felt before.

"Ahhh!"

"Hush," Edward calms me, stifling my gasps with his mouth. His oiled hands glide down and finally cup my neglected breasts. Very gently, he rolls my nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, hardening and elongating them at once, sending synaptic waves of pleasure all the way to my groin. Where that thing… vibrates. I cry out loudly.

"Edward, please…!"

"Hush, baby. Hang in there."

His lips move down from my neck towards one breast, trailing soft bites and sucks over and over, down towards my nipple… and then I feel the pinch of the clamp.

"AH!" The feeling is exquisite… causing every muscle deep in my belly to contract tightly.

He softly laves the restrained nipple with his tongue, and as he does so, applies the other… the bite of the second clamp is equally harsh… but just as good. I groan loudly. This is too much – all this over-stimulation… everywhere… and I can feel my body building… building to an explosion… with the relentless vibrations… and I'm afraid. It will be too intense. Will I be able to handle this?

"Good girl," he soothes.

"Edward," I pant, sounding so desperate, even to my own ears.

"Hush… feel it, Bella. Don't be afraid."

His hands are now on my waist, holding me… but I can't concentrate on them, what's inside me, and the clamps, too… I can feel my body starting to climb, and his hands kneading, moving round, moving down… behind me… around my backside. And suddenly he gently pushes his anointed finger inside me… *THERE! Into my backside.* And it feels odd, alien, full… but oh… so… *good*. And he moves it slowly, easing in and out, while his teeth graze my upturned chin…

"So beautiful, Bella."

And I can hold on no more. It's like I've been suspended high, high up above a wide, wide ravine, and now I'm falling, and I scream as my body convulses and climaxes at the overwhelming fullness. Nothing but sensation – everywhere – as my body explodes. Edward releases first one and then the other clamp, causing my nipples to sing with the surge of sweet, sweet painful feeling… but it's oh-so-good… and causing my orgasm, this orgasm… to go on and on… his finger stays where it is, gently easing in and out.

"Argh!" I cry out, and Edward wraps himself around me, holding me, as my body continues to pulse mercilessly inside.

"NO…!" I shout again, pleading, and this time he tugs the vibrator out of me, and his finger, too, as my body continues to convulse. He unstraps one of the cuffs so that my arms fall forward. My head lolls on his shoulder, and I am lost… lost to all this overwhelming sensation… and I am all shattered breath, exhausted desire and sweet, welcome oblivion.

Vaguely, I'm aware that Edward lifts me, carries me over to the bed, and lays me down on the cool satin sheets. His hands, still oiled, gently rub the backs of my thighs, my knees, my calves, and my shoulders. I feel the bed dip slightly as he stretches out beside me.

He pulls the mask off, but I don't have the energy to open my eyes. Finding my plait, he undoes the hair tie and leans forward, kissing me softly on my lips. The silence in the room is only disturbed by my erratic breathing that slowly steadies as I float gently back to Earth. The music has stopped.

"So beautiful," he murmurs.

When I persuade one eye to open, he's gazing down at me, smiling softly. "Hi," he says.

I manage a grunt in response, and his smile broadens.

"Rude enough for you?"

I nod. Jeez… any ruder and I'd have to spank the pair of us.

"I think you're trying to kill me," I mutter.

"Death by orgasm," he smirks. "There are worse ways to go," he says gently, but then frowns ever so slightly as an unpleasant thought crosses his mind. It distresses me. I reach up and caress his face.

"You can kill me like this anytime," I whisper. I notice that he's gloriously naked and ready for action. When he takes my hand and kisses my knuckles, I lean up, capture his face between my hands, and pull his mouth to mine.

He kisses me briefly, then stops.

"This is what I want to do," he murmurs and reaches beneath his pillow for the music center remote. He presses a button, and the soft strains of a guitar echo round the walls.

"I want to make love to you," he says, gazing down at me, his green eyes burning with bright, loving sincerity. Softly in the background, a familiar voice starts to sing…

The first time ever I saw your face
I thought the sun rose in your eyes

And his lips find mine.

As I tighten around him, finding my release once more, Edward unravels in my arms, his head thrown back as he calls out my name. He clasps me tightly to his chest as we sit nose to nose in the middle of his vast bed, me astride him. And in this moment… with this man, to this music… the intensity of my experience this morning in here with him, and all that has occurred during the past week, overwhelms me anew – not just physically but emotionally. I am completely overcome with all these feelings. I am so deeply, deeply in love with him. And I'm aware – we don't know each other well, and we have a mountain of stuff to wade through, but I know for each other, we will… and now we'll have a lifetime to do it.

For the first time, I'm offered a glimmer of understanding as to how he feels about my safety. His close call with Echo Charlie yesterday… I shudder at the thought. If anything happened to him… tears pool in my eyes. If anything ever happened to him – I love him so… Tears run unchecked down my cheeks. So many sides of Edward – his sweet, gentle persona and his rugged, I-can-do-what-I-fucking-well-like-to-you-and-you'll-come-like-a-train dominant side – his fifty shades – all of him… all spectacular... all mine.

"Hey," he breathes, clasping my head in his hands, gazing down at me. He's still inside me… "Why are you crying?" His voice is filled with concern.

"Because I love you so much," I whisper.

He half-closes his eyes, as if drugged, absorbing my words. When he opens them again, they blaze with his love.

"And I you, Bella. You make me… whole." He kisses me gently, as Roberta Flack finishes her song…

It would last till the end of time my love
The first time ever I saw your face… your face.

We have talked and talked and talked, sitting upright together on the bed in the playroom, me in his lap, our legs curled around each other. The red satin sheet is draped around us like a royal cocoon, and I have no idea how much time has passed. Edward is laughing at my impersonation of Rosalie during the photo shoot at the Heathman.

"To think it could have been her who came to interview me. Thank the Lord for the common cold," he murmurs and kisses my nose.

"I believe she had the flu, Edward," I scold him gently, trailing my fingers idly through his chest hair, and marveling that he's tolerating it so well.

"All the canes have gone," I murmur, recalling my distraction from earlier.

He tucks my hair behind my ear for the umpteenth time. "I didn't think you'd ever get past that hard limit."

"No, I don't think I will…" I whisper wide-eyed at him, then find myself glancing over at the whips lining the opposite wall. He follows my gaze.

"You want me to get rid of them, too?" He's amused but sincere.

"Not the crop… the brown one. Or that suede flogger… you know." I flush.

He smiles down at me. "Okay… the crop and the flogger. Why, Miss Swan, you're full of surprises."

"As are you, Mr. Cullen. It's one of the things I love about you." I kiss him gently at the corner of his mouth.

"What else do you love about me?" he asks, and his eyes widen slightly. I know it's a huge deal for him to ask this question. It humbles me… and I blink at him. I love everything about him – even his Fifty Shades. I know that life with Edward will never be boring…

"This…" I stroke my index finger across his lips. "I love this, and what comes out of it, and what you do with to me with it. And what's in here," I tap his temple. "You're so smart and witty and knowledgeable. Competent in so many things. But most of all… what's in here." I press my palm gently against his chest, feeling his steady, beating heart. "You are the most compassionate man I've ever met. What you do. How you work. It's awe-inspiring," I whisper.

"Awe-inspiring?" He's puzzled, and there's a trace of humor on his face… but then his face transforms, and his shy smile appears, as if he's embarrassed… and I want to launch myself at him. So I do.

I am dozing… wrapped in silk and Cullen. Edward nuzzles me awake.

"Hungry?" he whispers.

"Hmmm, famished."

"Me, too."

I lean up to gaze down at him, sprawled on the bed. "It's your birthday, Mr. Cullen. I'll cook you something. What would you like?"

"Surprise me." He runs his hand down my back, stroking me gently. "I should check my Blackberry for all the messages I missed yesterday." He sighs and starts to sit up, and I know this special time is over… for now. "Let's shower," he says.

Who am I to turn down the birthday boy?

Edward is in his study, on the phone. Taylor is with him, looking serious, but casual in jeans and a tight black t-shirt. I busy myself in the kitchen fixing lunch. I have found salmon steaks in the fridge, and I'm poaching them with lemon, making a salad and boiling some baby potatoes. I feel extraordinarily relaxed and happy, on top of the world… literally. Turning towards the large window. I stare out at the glorious blue sky. Jeez, all that talking… all that sexing… hmmm. A girl could get used to that.

Taylor emerges from the study, interrupting my reverie. I turn down my iPod and take out an earbud.

"Hi, Taylor."

"Bella," he nods.

"Your daughter okay?"

"Yes, thanks. My ex-wife thought she had appendicitis, but she was over-reacting… as usual." Taylor rolls his eyes, surprising me. "Sophie's fine. Just a nasty stomach bug."

"I'm sorry."

He smiles.

"Has Echo Charlie been located?"

"Yes. The recovery team is on its way. She should be back at Sea Tac late tonight."

"Oh good."

He gives me a tight smile. "Will that be all, ma'am?"

"Yes… yes, of course." I flush… will I ever get used to Taylor calling me ma'am? It makes me feel so old… at least thirty.

He nods politely and heads out of the great room. Edward is still on the phone… I am waiting for the potatoes to boil. It gives me an idea. Fetching my purse, I fish out my Blackberry. There's a text from Rose.

C U this evening. Looking forward to a looooooong chat

Same here I text back. Oh, it will be good to talk to Rose.

Calling up the email program I type a quick email to Edward.

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Lunch
Date: 20 June 2009: 13:12
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen,
I am emailing to inform you that your lunch is nearly ready.
And that I had some mind-blowing kinky fuckery earlier today.
Birthday kinky fuckery is to be recommended.
And another thing… I love you.

B x
(The Future Mrs Cullen)

I listen carefully for a reaction, but he's still on the phone. I shrug… perhaps he's just too busy. My Blackberry vibrates.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Kinky Fuckery!
Date: 20 June 2009 13.15
To: Isabella Swan

What aspect was most mind-blowing?
I am making notes.

Edward Cullen
Famished and wasting away CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings

PS: I love your signature
PPS: What happened to the art of conversation?

-

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Famished?
Date: 20 June 2009: 13:18
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr. Cullen,
May I draw your attention to the first line of my previous email informing you that your lunch is indeed almost ready… so none of this famished and wasting away nonsense.
With regard to the mind-blowing aspects of the kinky fuckery… frankly – all of it.
I'd be interested in reading your notes.
And I like my bracketed bit, too.

Bx
(The Future Mrs Cullen)

PS: Since when have you been so loquacious? And you're on the phone!

-

I press send, and look up… and he's standing in front of me, smirking. Before I can say anything, he bounds around the kitchen island, sweeps me up in his arms, and kisses me soundly.

"That is all, Miss Swan," he says, releasing me, and he saunters – in his jeans, bare feet and untucked white shirt – back to his office, leaving me breathless.

I've made a watercress, cilantro, and sour cream dip to accompany the salmon, and I've set the breakfast bar. I hate interrupting him while he's working, but now I stand in the doorway of his office. He's still on the phone, all thoroughly-fucked hair and bright green eyes – a visually nourishing feast. He looks up when he sees me, and doesn't take his eyes off me. He frowns slightly – and I don't know if it's at me or because of his conversation.

"Just let them in and leave them alone. Do you understand, Alice?" he hisses, and rolls his eyes. "Good."

I mime eating, and he grins at me and nods.

"I'll see you later."

He hangs up.

"One more call?" he asks.

"Sure."

"That dress is very short," he adds.

"You like it?" I give him a quick twirl. It's one Caroline Acton's purchases: a soft turquoise sundress, probably more suitable for the beach... but it's such a lovely day… on so many levels.

He frowns, and my face falls.

"You look fantastic in it. Bella. I just don't want anyone else to see you like that."

"Oh!" I scowl at him. "We're at home, Edward. No one but the staff…!"

His mouth twists, and either he's trying to hide his amusement, or he really doesn't think that's funny. But eventually he nods, reassured. I shake my head at him – he's actually being serious? – and head to the kitchen.

Five minutes later, he's back in front of me, holding the phone.

"I have Charlie for you," he murmurs, his eyes wary.

All the air leaves my body at once. I take the phone and cover the mouthpiece.

"You told him!" I hiss.

Edward nods, and his eyes widen at my obvious look of distress.

Shit! I take a deep breath.

"Hi, Dad,"

"ARE YOU PREGNANT?"

I roll my eyes. "No, Dad…!"

"You've been seeing that guy for about a week, Bella. What's going on?"

Jeez… over-reaction.

"It's been longer than that, Dad." Hastily, I leave the kitchen area and head towards the great window. The doors on to the balcony are open. I can't quite walk to the edge… it's just too far up.

"Bella, talk to me."

"Dad… I know it's sudden and all – but… well, I love him. He loves me. He wants to marry me, and… there'll never be anyone else for me." My words come tumbling out in an incoherent anxious rush.

Charlie is silent on the other end of the phone. "Have you told your mother?"

"No."

"Bella… I mean, I know he's all kind of rich and eligible – but marriage? It's such a big step."

"Would you rather we lived in sin?"

He gasps. "Now just hold up there, young lady – "

"Dad!" I stop what is about to become a tirade. "Let me remind you that I am legally an adult in Washington State, and just because you and Mom didn't have your happy ever after, it doesn't mean that I can't."

"He's your happy ever after?" Charlie says after a moment, his tone softer.

"Dad… he's everything."

"Bella, Bella, Bella. You're such a headstrong young woman. I hope to God you know what you're doing. Hand me back to him, will you?"

"Sure, Daddy. Be gentle with him. He's very special."

I think Charlie smiles at the end of the phone… but it's hard to tell. It's always hard to tell with Charlie.

"Sure thing, Bells. And come and visit your old man… and bring this Edward with you."

I march back into the room – pissed at Edward for not warning me – and hand him back the phone, my expression letting him know just how pissed I am.

He's amused as he takes the phone and heads back into his study.

Two minutes later, he reappears.

"I have your father's rather begrudging blessing," he says proudly… so proudly, in fact, that it makes me giggle, and he grins at me. He's glowing like he's just negotiated a major new merger or acquisition… which I suppose, on one level, he has.

"Damn, you're a good cook, woman." Edward swallows his last mouthful and raises his glass of white wine at me.

I blossom at his praise, and it occurs to me I'll only get to cook for him on weekends… I frown. I enjoy cooking. Perhaps I should have made him a cake for his birthday. I check my watch… I still have time.

"Bella?" He interrupts my thoughts. "Why did you ask me not to take your photo?" His question startles me, all the more because his voice is deceptively soft.

Oh… shit. The photos. I stare down at my empty plate, twisting my fingers in my lap. What can I say? I'd promised myself not to mention that I'd found his version of readers' wives…

"Bella," he snaps. "What is it?"

He makes me jump, and his voice commands me to look at him. When did I think he didn't intimidate me?

"I found your photos," I whisper.

His eyes widen slightly and he gasps. "You've been in the safe?" he asks, incredulous.

What?

"Safe? No. I didn't know you had a safe."

He frowns.

"I don't understand."

"In your closet. The box. I was looking for your tie and… the box was under your jeans. The ones you normally wear in the playroom. Except today." I flush.

He gapes at me, clearly appalled, and nervously runs his hand through his hair as he processes this information. He rubs his chin, lost in thought, but he can't mask the perplexed annoyance etched on his face. Abruptly, he shakes his head, exasperated – but amused, too – and a very faint smile kisses the corner of his mouth, accompanied by a hint of admiration. He steeples his hands in front of him and focuses on me once more.

"It's not what you think. I'd forgotten all about them. That box has been moved. Those photographs belong in my safe… There's only one person who could have done that."

"What do you mean, it's not what I think?"

He sighs and cocks his head to one side… and I think he's slightly embarrassed. *So he should be!* my subconscious snarls…

"This is going to sound really cold, but – they're an insurance policy," he whispers. He tenses, steeling himself for my response.

"Insurance policy?"

"Against exposure."

The penny drops… and rattles uncomfortably round and round in my empty head.

"Oh," I murmur, because I can't think of what else to say.

I close my eyes. This is it. This is Fifty Shades of Fucked-Up, right here, right now.

"Yes. You're right. That does sound cold." I stand, to clear our dishes… I don't really want to know any more.

"Bella…"

"Do they know? The girls… the subs?"

He frowns at me. "Of course they know."

Oh… well, that's something. He grabs me and pulls me to him.

"Those photos are supposed to be in the safe. They're not for recreational use." He stops. "Maybe they were, when they were taken originally. But – " he stops, imploring me. "They don't mean anything."

"Who put them in your closet?"

"It could only have been Lauren."

"She knows your safe combination?"

He shrugs. "It wouldn't surprise me. It's a very long combination, and I go into it so rarely, it's the one number I have written down." He shakes his head. "I wonder what else she knows. Look, I'll destroy the photos. Now, if you like."

"They're your photos, Edward. Do with them as you wish," I mutter quietly.

"Don't be like that," he says, taking my head in his hands and holding my gaze to his. "I don't want that life. I want our life, together. Please believe me."

Holy cow… How does he know? That beneath my horror about these photos, is the fact that… I'm paranoid.

"Bella, I thought we exorcised all those ghosts this morning. I feel that way. Don't you?"

I blink up at him, recalling our very, very pleasurable, and romantic, and downright dirty, morning in his playroom.

"Yes," I smile. "Yes, I do feel like that, too."

"Good." He leans forward and kisses me, folding me in his arms. "I'll shred them," he murmurs. "And then I have to go to work. I'm sorry baby, but I have a mountain of business to get through this afternoon."

"It's cool. I have to call my mother," I grimace. "Then I want to do some shopping, and bake you a cake."

He grins, and his eyes light up like a small boy's. "A cake?"

I nod.

"A chocolate cake?"

"You want a chocolate cake?" His grin is infectious.

He nods.

"I'll see what I can do, Mr. Cullen."

He kisses me once more.

"Oh, Bella, that doesn't surprise me at all," Renee gushes. "I'm thrilled for you, honey. I can tell you love him… and he, you. Have you set a date?"

I am staring over the top of Seattle, on the balcony, stunned into silence.

"Honey, are you still there?"

"Sure, Mom. I'm just… surprised. I thought you'd be mad."

"Mad at you, darling? No – I'm delighted for you. Honey, no one has piqued your interest *ever*. But you're like Charlie," she sighs. "Once you've made up your mind… I could tell in Florida that there was something very special between you two."

In Florida, he wanted me to be his submissive – but I won't tell her that.

"We haven't set a date. I'm still, you know, getting used to the idea."

"Take all the time you need, darling. Does Charlie know?"

"Edward's just asked him."

"Oh, that's so sweet. I'd like to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation."

I giggle. "Yeah, me too, Mom."

"Bella, darling, I love you so much. I'm very happy for you. And you must both visit."

"Yes, Mom. I love you, too."

"Phil is calling me, I have to go. Let me have a date. We need to plan… are you having a big wedding?"

Big wedding… jeez. I haven't even thought about that. Big wedding… no. I don't want a big wedding.

"I don't know yet. As soon as I do, I'll call."

"Good. You take care now… and be safe. I'm far too young to be a Grandma, and you two need to have some fun."

Hmm… and there it is again – the fact that she had me so early.

"Mom… I didn't really ruin your life, did I?"

"Oh no, Bella, never think that. You were the best thing that ever happened to me and Charlie… and to me, period."

I am slightly reassured. "Mom, I'll let you go. I'll call soon."

"Love you, darling."

"Me too, Mom. Goodbye."

Edward's kitchen is a dream to work in. For a man who knows nothing about cooking, he seems to have everything. I suspect Mrs Cope loves to cook, too. The only thing I need is some high quality chocolate for the frosting. I leave the two halves of the cake cooling on the side, grab my purse, and pop my head round Edward's study door. He's concentrating on his computer screen. He looks up and smiles at me.

"I'm just heading to the store to pick up some ingredients."

"Okay…" he frowns at me.

"What?"

"You going to put some jeans on or something?"

Oh come on.

"Edward, they're just legs."

He gazes at me, unamused. This is going to be a fight. And it's his birthday… I roll my eyes at him, feeling like an errant teenager.

"What if we were at the beach?" I take a different tack.

"We're not at the beach."

"Would you object if we *were* at the beach?"

He considers this for a moment. "No," he says simply.

I roll my eyes again and smirk at him.

"Well, just imagine we are. Laters." I turn and bolt for the foyer. I make it to the elevator before he catches up with me. As the doors close, I wave at him, grinning sweetly, as he watches, helpless – but fortunately amused – with narrowed eyes. He shakes his head in exasperation, then I can see him no more.

Oh, that was exciting… adrenaline is pounding through my veins, and my heart feels like it wants to exit my chest. But as the elevator descends, so do my spirits. Shit… what have I done? I have a tiger by the tail… He's going to be so mad when I get back. My subconscious is glaring at me over her half-moon glasses, a willow switch in her hand… Shit. I think about what little experience I have with men. I've never lived with a man before… I mean, for so long it was just me and my mom… her marriage to Phil only happened just before I left for college. And Charlie… well, two weeks a year until I was fourteen hardly counts – and he's my dad.

And now Edward. He's never really lived with anyone… I think. I'll have to ask him – if he's still talking to me.

But I feel strongly that I should wear what I like. I remember his rules. Yes… this must be hard for him, too. Well, he sure as hell paid for this dress – he should have given Neimans a better brief. Nothing too short! This skirt isn't that short… is it? I check in the large mirror in the lobby… yes, it is quite short. Oh well… I've made a stand now. And no doubt I'll have to face the consequences. I wonder idly what he'll do – but first I need cash.

I stare at the receipt from the ATM. $51,689.16 in my account. That's $50,000 too much.

Isabella, you're going to have to learn to be rich too, if you say yes.

And so it begins… I take my paltry $50 and head to the store.

I head straight to the kitchen when I arrive back, and I can't help feeling a frisson… Edward is still in his study. Jeez, that's most of the afternoon. I decide my best option is to face him and see how much damage I've done. I peek cautiously round his study door… he's on the phone, staring out the window.

"And the EuroCopter specialist is due Monday afternoon? … Good. Just keep me informed. Tell them that I'll need their initial findings either Monday evening or Tuesday morning." He hangs up and swivels his chair round, but stills when he sees me, his expression impassive.

"Hi," I whisper.

He says nothing, and my heart freefalls into my stomach. Gingerly, I walk into his study and round his desk to where he's sitting. He still says nothing, his eyes never leaving mine.

I stand in front of him, feeling fifty shades of foolish. "I'm back. Are you mad at me?"

He sighs, reaches out for my hand, and pulls me into his lap, folding his arms around me. He buries his nose in my hair. "Yes," he says.

"I'm sorry… I don't know what came over me."

I curl up in his lap, inhaling his heavenly Edward smell, feeling safe in spite of the fact that he's mad.

"Me, either. Wear what you like," he murmurs. He runs his hand up my bare leg, to my thigh. "Besides, this dress has its advantages."

He bends to kiss me, and as our lips touch, passion or lust or a deep-seated need to make amends lances through me and desire flares in my blood. I seize his head in my hands, fisting my fingers in his hair. He groans as his body responds, as he hungrily chews at my lower lip – my throat, my ear, his tongue invading my mouth, and before I'm even aware of it, he's unzipping his pants, pulling me astride his lap, and sinking into me. I grasp the back of the chair, my feet just touching the ground… and we start to move.

"I like your version of sorry," he breathes into my hair.

"And I like yours," I giggle, snuggling against his chest. "Have you finished?"

"Christ, Bella, you want more?"

"No…! Your work."

"I'll be done in about half an hour. I heard your message on my voicemail."

"From yesterday."

"You sounded worried."

I hug him tightly. "I was. It's not like you not to respond."

He kisses my hair.

"Your cake should be ready in half an hour." I smile at him and clamber off his lap.

"Looking forward to it. It smelt delicious. Evocative even, while it was baking."

I smile shyly down at him, feeling a little self-conscious, and he mirrors my expression… jeez, are we really so different? Perhaps it's his early memories of baking. Leaning down, I plant a swift kiss on the corner of his mouth and make my way back to the kitchen.

I hear him come out of his study, and all prepared, I light the solitary gold candle on his cake. He gives me an ear splitting grin as he saunters towards me, and I softly sing Happy Birthday to him. Then he leans over and blows it out, closing his eyes.

"I've made my wish," he says as he opens them again, and for some reason his look makes me flush.

"The frosting is still soft… I hope you like it."

"I can't wait to taste it, Isabella," he murmurs… and he makes that sound so rude. I cut us each a slice, and with small pastry forks, we tuck in.

"Hmmm," he groans in appreciation. "This is why I want to marry you."

And I laugh with relief… he likes it.

"Ready to face my family?" Edward switches the R8 ignition off. We're parked in his parents' driveway.

"Yes. Are you going to tell them?"

"Of course. Looking forward to seeing their reactions." He smiles wickedly at me and climbs out of the car.

It is seven-thirty, and though it's been a warm day, there's a cool evening breeze blowing off the Bay. I pull my wrap around me as I step out of the car. I'm wearing a silver grey

party dress I found this morning while I was rummaging through the closet. It has a wide matching belt. Edward takes my hand, and we head to the front door.

Carlisle opens it wide before he can knock. "Edward, hello. Happy Birthday, son." He takes Edward's proffered hand, but pulls him into a brief hug, surprising him.

"Err… thanks, Dad."

"Bella, how lovely to see you again." He hugs me, too, and we follow him into the house.

Before we can set foot in the living room, Rose comes barreling down the hallway towards the two of us. She looks furious… *oh no!*

"You two! I want to talk to you," she snarls in her you-better-not-fucking-mess-with-me voice. I glance nervously at Edward, who shrugs and decides to humor her as we follow her into the dining room, leaving Carlisle bemused on the threshold of the living room. She shuts the door and turns on me.

"What the *fuck* is this?" she hisses and waves a piece of paper at me. Completely at a loss, I take it from her and scan it quickly. My mouth dries… *holy shit*. It's my email response to Edward, discussing the contract.

Chapter 87

I feel all the color drain from my face as my blood turns to ice and fear lances through my body. Instinctively, I step between her and Edward.

"What is it?" Edward murmurs, his tone wary.

I ignore him. I cannot believe Rose is doing this.

"Rose! This is nothing to do with you." I glare venomously at her, anger replacing my fear. How dare she do this? Not now… not today. Not on Edward's birthday. She blinks at me, blue eyes wide, surprised by my response.

"Bella, what is it?" Edward says again, his tone more menacing.

"Edward, would you just go, please?" I ask him.

"No. Show me." He holds out his hand, and I know he's not to be argued with – his voice is cold and hard. Reluctantly, I give him the email.

"What's he done to you?" Rose asks, and she looks so apprehensive. I flush as a myriad of erotic images flit quickly across my mind.

"That's none of your business, Rose." I can't keep the exasperation out of my voice.

"Where did you get this?" Edward asks, his head cocked to one side, his face expressionless, but his voice… so menacingly soft.

Rose flushes slightly. "That's irrelevant."

At his stony glare, she hastily continues.

"It was in the pocket of a jacket, which I assume was yours, that I found on the back of Bella's door in her room." Faced with Edward's burning green gaze, Rose's steeliness slips a little, but she seems to recover herself, and glowers at him. She's a beacon of hostility in a slinky bright red dress… she looks magnificent. But what the hell was she going through my clothes for? It's usually the other way round…

"Have you told anyone?" Edwards voice is like a silk glove.

"No! Of course not," Rose snaps, affronted.

Edward nods, and appears to relax slightly. Turning, he heads towards the fireplace. Wordlessly, Rose and I watch as he picks up a lighter from the mantelpiece, sets fire to the email, and releases it, letting it float afire, slowly into the grate… until it is no more. The silence in the room is oppressive.

"Not even Emmett?" I ask, turning my attention back to Rose.

"No one," Rose says emphatically, and for the first time she looks puzzled and hurt. "I just want to know you're okay, Bella," she whispers.

"I'm fine, Rose. More than fine. Please… Edward and I are really good – this is old news. Please ignore it."

"Ignore it?" she says. "How can I ignore that? What's he done to you?" And her blue eyes are so full of heartfelt concern.

"He hasn't done anything to me, Rose. Honestly – I'm good."

She blinks at me. "Really?" she asks.

Edward wraps an arm around me and draws me close, not taking his eyes off Rose.

"Bella has consented to be my wife, Rosalie," he says quietly.

"Wife!" Rose squeaks, her eyes widening in disbelief.

"We're getting married. We're going to announce our engagement this evening," he says.

"Oh…!" Rose gapes at me. She's stunned. "I leave you alone for sixteen days, and this happens…? It's very sudden. So yesterday, when I said…" She gazes at me, lost. "Where does that email fit into all this?"

"It doesn't, Rose. Forget it – please. I love him, and he loves me. Don't do this. Don't ruin his party and our night," I whisper.

She blinks at me, and unexpectedly, her eyes are shining with tears.

"No. Of course I won't. You're okay?" She wants reassurance.

"I've never been happier," I whisper.

She reaches forward, and in spite of Edward's arm wrapped around me, grabs my hand.

"You really are okay?" she asks hopefully.

"Yes." I grin at her, my joy returning. She's back onside.

She smiles at me, my happiness reflecting back on her. I step out of Edward's hold, and she hugs me suddenly.

"Oh, Bella – I was so worried when I read this. I didn't know what to think. Will you explain it to me?" she whispers.

"One day… not now."

"Good. I won't tell anyone. I love you so much, Bella, like my own sister. I just thought… I didn't know what to think. I'm sorry. If you're happy, then I'm happy." She looks directly at Edward and repeats her apology. He nods at her, his eyes glacial, and his expression does not change. Oh shit… he's still mad.

"I really am sorry. You're right, it's none of my business," she whispers to me.

There's a knock on the door that startles Rose and I apart. Esme pokes her head round.

"Everything okay, darling?" she asks Edward.

"Everything's fine, Mrs. Cullen," Rose says immediately.

"Fine, Mom," Edward says… and seems to relax a little.

"Good." Esme enters. "Then you won't mind if I give my son a birthday hug." She beams at both of us. He hugs her tightly, and thaws immediately.

"Happy birthday, darling," she says softly, closing her eyes in his embrace. "I'm so glad you're still with us."

"Mom, I'm fine." Edward smiles down at her. She pulls back, looks at him closely, and grins.

"I'm so happy for you," she says and caresses his face.

He grins at her – his 1000 megawatt smile.

She knows! When did he tell her?

"Well, kids, if you've all finished your tête-à-tête… There's a throng of people here to check that you really are in one piece, Edward, and to wish you a happy birthday."

"I'll be right there."

Esme glances anxiously at Rose and me, and seems reassured by our smiles. She winks at me as she holds the door open for us. Edward holds out his hand to me, and I take it.

"Edward, I really do apologize," Rose says humbly.

Humble Rose is something to behold. Edward nods at her, and we follow her out.

In the hallway, I gaze anxiously up at Edward. "Does your mother know about us?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

And to think, our evening could have been derailed by the tenacious Miss Hale. I shudder at the thought – the ramifications of Edward's lifestyle revealed to all… Holy cow.

"Well, that was an interesting start to the evening." I smile sweetly at him.

He glances down at me – and it's back, his amused look. *Thank heavens.*

"As ever, Miss Swan, you have a gift for understatement." He raises my hand to his lips and kisses my knuckles as we walk into the living room – to a sudden, spontaneous, and deafening round of applause.

Holy cow… how many people are here?

I scan the room quickly. All the Cullens, Jasper with Alice, Dr. Banner and… his wife? Mac from the boat, a tall, handsome African American – I remember seeing him in Edward's office the first time I met Edward – Alice's bitchy friend, Jane, two women I don't recognize at all, and… oh no. My heart sinks. *That woman*… Mrs. Robinson.

Heidi materializes with a tray of champagne. She's in a low-cut black dress, no pigtails, but an up do, flushing and fluttering her eyelashes at Edward. The applause dies down, and Edward squeezes my hand as all eyes turn to him expectantly.

"Thank you, everyone. Looks like I'll need one of these." He grabs two drinks off Heidi's tray and gives her a brief smile… and I think she's going to expire or swoon or something. He hands one to me.

Edward raises his glass to the rest of the room, and immediately, everyone surges forward. Leading the charge is the evil woman in black. Does she ever wear any other color?

"Edward, I was so worried…" Irina gives him a brief hug and kisses both his cheeks. He doesn't let me go, in spite of the fact I try to free my hand.

"I'm good, Irina," Edward mutters coolly.

"Why didn't you call me?" Her plea is desperate, her eyes searching his.

"I've been busy."

"Didn't you get my messages?"

Edward shifts uncomfortably and pulls me closer, putting his arm around me. His face remains impassive as he regards Irina. She can no longer ignore me, so she nods politely in my direction.

"Bella," she purrs. "You look lovely, dear."

"Irina," I purr back. "Thank you."

I catch Esme's eye. She frowns slightly, watching the three of us.

"Irina, I need to make an announcement," Edward says, gazing dispassionately at her. Her clear blue eyes cloud slightly.

"Of course." She fakes a smile and steps back.

"Everyone," Edward calls. He waits for a moment until the buzz in the room dies down and all eyes are once more on him.

"Thank you for coming today. I have to say I was expecting a quiet family dinner, so this is a pleasant surprise." He stares pointedly at Alice, who grins and gives him a little wave. Edward shakes his head slightly in exasperation and continues. "Kate and I – " He acknowledges the red-haired woman standing nearby with a small bubbly blonde. *Oh… that's the Kate who works with him.* "We had a close call yesterday." Kate grins and raises her glass to him. He nods back at her. "So I'm especially glad to be here today to share with all of you my very good news. This beautiful woman," he glances down at me, "Miss Isabella Marie Swan, has consented to be my wife, and I'd like you to be the first to know."

There are general gasps of astonishment, the odd cheer, and then… a round of applause! *Jeez – this is really happening*. I think I am the color of Rose's dress. Edward grasps my chin, lifts my lips to his, and kisses me quickly.

"You'll soon be mine."

"I am already," I whisper.

"Legally," he mouths at me, and gives me a wicked grin.

Jane, standing beside Alice, looks crestfallen. Heidi looks like she's eaten something particularly unpleasant, and as I glance round anxiously at the assembled crowd, I catch sight of Irina. Her mouth is open. She's stunned – horrified even, and I can't help a small but intense feeling of satisfaction to see her dumbstruck. *What the hell is she doing here, anyway?*

Carlisle and Esme interrupt my uncharitable thoughts, and soon I am being hugged and kissed and passed round all the Cullens.

"Oh, Bella – I am so delighted you're going to be family," Esme gushes. "The change in Edward. He's… *happy*. I am so thankful to you." I blush, embarrassed by her exuberance, but secretly delighted, too.

"Where is the ring?" exclaims Alice as she embraces me.

"Um…" *A ring…*! Jeez – I hadn't even thought about a ring. I glance anxiously up at Edward.

"We're going to choose one together," Edward glowers at her.

"Oh, don't look at me like that, Cullen!" she scolds him, then wraps her arms around him. "I'm so thrilled for you, Edward," she says. She's the only person I know who is not intimidated by the Cullen glower. It has me quailing… well, it certainly used to.

"When will you get married? Have you set a date?" She beams up at Edward.

He gazes at her, his exasperation palpable. "No idea, and no, we haven't. Bella and I need to discuss this," he says irritably.

"I hope you have a big wedding – here," she beams enthusiastically, ignoring his caustic tone.

"We'll probably fly to Vegas tomorrow," he growls at her, and he's rewarded with a full-on Alice Cullen pouty scowl.

Rolling his eyes, he turns to Emmett, who gives him his second bear hug in as many days. "Way to go, bro." He claps Edward's back.

The response from the room is overwhelming, and it's a few minutes before I find myself back beside Edward, along with Dr. Banner. Irina seems to have disappeared, and Heidi is sullenly refilling champagne glasses.

Beside Dr. Banner is a striking young woman with long, dark, almost black hair, cleavage, and lovely hazel eyes.

"Edward," says Banner, holding out his hand.

Edward shakes it gladly. "John. Rhian…" He kisses the dark-haired woman on her cheek. She's very petite and very pretty.

"Glad you're still with us, Edward. My life would be most dull – and penurious – without you."

Edward smirks.

"John!" Rhian scolds him mildly, much to Edward's amusement.

"Rhian, this is Isabella, my fiancé. Bella, this is John's wife."

"Delighted to meet the woman who has finally captured Edward's heart," Rhian smiles kindly at me.

"Thank you," I mutter, embarrassed again.

"That was one googly you bowled there, Edward." Dr. Banner shakes his head in amused disbelief. Edward frowns at him.

"John – you and your cricket metaphors…" Rhian rolls her eyes. "Congratulations to the pair of you, and happy birthday, Edward. What a wonderful birthday present," she smiles generously at me. It makes me blush. I had no idea Dr. Banner would be here… or Irina. It's a shock, and I rack my brain to see if there is anything I should ask him – but a birthday party hardly seems the appropriate venue for a psychiatric consult.

For a few minutes, we make small talk… Rhian is a stay-at-home mom with two young boys. I deduce that she is the reason Dr. Banner practices in the US.

"She's good, Edward. Responding well to treatment. Another couple of weeks and we can consider an out-patient program." Dr. Banner's and Edward's voices are low, but I can't help listening in, rather rudely tuning out Rhian.

"So it's all play-dates and diapers at the moment..."

"That must take up your time." I flush, turning my attention back to Rhian, who laughs sweetly. I know Edward and Banner are discussing Lauren.

"Ask her something for me," Edward murmurs.

"So what do you do, Isabella?"

"Bella, please. I work in publishing."

Edward and Dr. Banner lower their voices further… it's so frustrating. But they stop when we're joined by the two women I didn't recognize earlier – Kate and the bubbly blonde, whom Edward introduces as her partner, Gwen. Kate is charming, and I soon discover they live almost opposite Escala. She is full of praise for Edward's piloting skills. It was her first time in Echo Charlie, and she says she wouldn't hesitate to go again. She's one of the few women I've met who isn't dazzled by him… well, the reason is obvious. Gwen is giggly, with a wry sense of humor, and Edward seems extraordinarily at ease with both of them. He knows them well. They don't discuss work, but I can tell that Kate's one smart woman who can easily keep up with him. She also has a great, throaty, too-many-cigarettes laugh.

Esme interrupts our leisurely conversation to inform everyone that dinner is being served, buffet-style, in the Cullen kitchen. Slowly, the guests make their way towards the back of the house.

Alice collars me in the hallway. In her pale pink, frothy, baby doll dress and killer heels, she looks so pretty and sweet, like she should be atop a Christmas tree. She's holding two cocktail glasses.

"Bella," she hisses conspiratorially.

I glance up at Edward, who releases me with a best-of-luck-I-find-her-impossible-to-deal-with-too look, and I sneak into the dinning room with her.

"Here," she says mischievously. "This is one of my Dad's special Lemon Martinis – much nicer than champagne." She hands me a glass, and watches anxiously while I take a tentative sip.

"Hmmm… delicious. But strong." What does she want? Is she trying to get me drunk?

"Bella, I need some advice. And I can't ask Jane – she's so judgmental about everything." Alice rolls her eyes, then grins at me. "She is so jealous of you. I think she was hoping one day that she and Edward…" Alice bursts out laughing at the absurdity, and I quail slightly inside. This is something I will have to contend with for a long time – other women wanting my man. I push the unwelcome thought out of my head, and distract myself with the matter in hand, taking another sip of my martini.

"I'll try and help. Fire away."

"As you know, Jasper and I have recently… gotten together. Thanks to you," she beams at me.

"Yes." Where the hell is she going with this?

"Bella – he just won't sleep with me," she pouts.

"Oh." I blink at her, stunned. Do we know each other well enough to have this conversation? Alice is oblivious.

"He thinks it's too soon. You know… I haven't done it before, and he wants us to take our time." She stops, exasperated.

"Oh… I see," I mutter, trying to buy myself some time. What can I say? I didn't know Edward well… will I ever? I smile at the errant thought that now I have a lifetime to try… but he had no compunction about taking my virginity. In fact, I recall, he was horrified to learn I had no experience. The memory of his shocked, outraged look makes me smile. Jeez – I am still relatively new to matters sexual… though I've covered a lot of the bases in the last few weeks. I flush at the thought.

"Alice, this is something the two of you have to work out together. It's really not for me to say."

Alice pouts at me. "What about you and Edward?"

"Alice," I scold her, glowering.

She grins at me. "You've learned that look from Edward."

I flush. "Edward and I – " I stop. I really don't want to talk about us. "It's private. If you want advice, ask Rose. She's much more open about her relationships."

"You think?" Alice asks brightly and without a hint of sarcasm, not phased by my reticence at all.

"Yes." I smile encouragingly.

"Cool. Thanks, Bella." She gives me another hug and scuttles excitedly – and impressively, given her high heels – to the door, no doubt off to bother Rose. I take another sip of my martini, and I'm about to follow her, when I am stopped in my tracks. Irina breezes into the room, her face taut, set in grim, angry determination. She closes the door quietly behind her and scowls at me.

Oh crap.

"Bella," she sneers.

I summon all my self-possession, slightly fuzzy from two glasses of champagne and the lethal cocktail I hold in my hand. I think the blood has drained from my face, but I marshal

both my subconscious and my inner goddess in order to appear as calm and as unflappable as I can.

"Irina." My voice is small, but steady – in spite of my dry mouth. Why does this woman freak me out so much? And what does she want now?

"I would offer you my heartfelt congratulations, but I think that would be inappropriate." Her piercing cold blue eyes stare frostily into mine, filled with loathing.

"I neither need or want your congratulations, Irina. I'm surprised and disappointed to see you here."

She arches an eyebrow at me… I think she's impressed.

"I wouldn't have thought of you as a worthy adversary, Isabella. But you surprise me at every turn."

"I haven't thought of you at all," I lie, coolly. Edward would be proud. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have much better things to do than waste my time with you."

"Not so fast, missy," she hisses, leaning against the door, effectively blocking it. "What on earth do you think you're doing, consenting to marry Edward? If you think for one minute you can make him happy, you're very much mistaken."

"What I'm consenting to do with Edward is none of your concern, madam." I smile with sarcastic sweetness.

She ignores me. "He has needs – needs you cannot possibly begin to satisfy," she hisses.

"What do you know of his needs?" I snarl. My sense of indignation flares brightly, burning inside me as adrenaline surges through my body. How dare this fucking bitch preach to me? "You're nothing but a sick child molester, and if it was up to me, I'd toss you into the seventh circle of hell and walk away smiling. Now, get out of my way – or do I have to make you?"

"You're making a big mistake here, lady." She shakes a long, skinny, finely-manicured finger at me. "How dare you judge our lifestyle? You know nothing, and you have no idea what you're taking on board. And if you think he's going to be happy with a mousy little goldigger like you – "

That's it! I throw the rest of my lemon martini over her, drenching her.

"Don't you *dare* tell me what I'm taking on board!" I shout at her. "When will you learn – it's none of your goddamned business!"

She gapes at me, horror struck, wiping the sticky drink off her face. I think she's about to lunge at me, but she's suddenly shunted forward as the door opens.

Edward is standing in the doorway. It takes him a nanosecond to assess the situation – me ashen and shaking, her soaked and livid. His lovely face darkens and contorts with anger as he comes to stand between us.

"What the fuck are you doing, Irina?" he says, his voice glacial and laced with menace.

She blinks up at him. "She's not right for you, Edward," she whispers.

"*What?*" he shouts, startling both of us. I can't see his face, but his whole body has tensed and radiates animosity.

"How the *fuck* do you know what's right for me?"

"You have needs, Edward," she pleads.

"I've told you before – this is none of your fucking business," he roars. Oh crap – Very Angry Edward has reared his not-so-ugly head. People are going to hear.

"What is this?" he pauses, glaring at her. "Do you think it's you? *You?* You think you're right for me?" His voice is softer, but drips contempt, and suddenly, I don't want to be here. I don't want to witness this intimate encounter… I'm intruding. But I'm stuck – my limbs unwilling to move.

Irina swallows and seems to draw herself upright. Her stance changes subtly, becomes more commanding, and she steps towards him.

"I was the best thing that ever happened to you," she hisses arrogantly at him. "Look at you now – one of the richest, most successful, entrepreneurs in the US – controlled, driven – you need nothing. You are master of your universe."

He steps back as if he's been struck, and I can see his expression. He gapes at her in outraged disbelief.

"You loved it, Edward – don't try and kid yourself. You were on the road to self-destruction, and I saved you from that – saved you from a life behind bars. Believe me baby, that's where you would have ended up. I taught you everything you know – everything you need."

Edward blanches, staring at her in horror. When he speaks, his voice is low and incredulous.

"You taught me how to fuck, Irina. But it's empty, like you. No wonder Linc left."

Bile rises into my mouth. I should not be here. But I'm frozen to the spot, morbidly fascinated, as they eviscerate each other.

"You never once held me," Edward whispers. "You never once said you loved me."

She narrows her eyes. "Love is for fools, Edward." And she reaches up to grasp his arm, her gesture beyond patronizing.

"Get out of my house," Esme breathes.

Three pair of eyes swing rapidly to where Esme stands, on the threshold of the room. She is glaring at Irina, who pales beneath her St. Tropez tan.

Time seems suspended as we collectively take a deep gasping breath, and Esme stalks deliberately into the room. Her eyes blaze with fury, never once leaving Irina, until she stands before her. Irina's eyes widen in alarm – and Esme slaps her hard across the face, the sound of the impact resounding off the walls of the dining room.

"Take your filthy paws off my son, you whore, and get out of my house – now!" she hisses through gritted teeth.

Irina clutches her reddening cheek and stares in horror for a moment, shocked and blinking at Esme. Then she hurries from the room, not bothering to close the door behind her.

Esme turns slowly to face Edward, and a tense silence settles like a thick blanket over us. Edward and Esme, staring at each other. After a beat, Esme speaks.

"Bella, before I hand him over to you, would you mind giving me a minute or two alone with my son?" Her voice is quiet, husky, but oh-so-strong.

"Of course," I whisper, and exit as quickly as I can, glancing anxiously over my shoulder. But neither of them look at me as I leave… they are staring at each other, their unspoken communication blaringly loud.

In the hallway, I am momentarily lost. My heart pounds, and my blood races through my veins… I feel panicked and out of my depth. *Holy Fuck*, that was heavy… and now Esme knows. Crap. I can't think what she's going to say to Edward.

I need to gather my wits and my thoughts, to try and process what I've just witnessed. I can't go out the front door… I might meet ***her*** again. I can hear sounds of merriment from the kitchen at the back of the house. I cannot face the partygoers right now, which means the yard offers no refuge. This leaves me one option – upstairs. I bolt, two stairs at a time,

to the second floor, then up to the third, my destination becoming clear. There's only one place I want to be.

I open the door to Edward's childhood bedroom and shut it behind me, taking a huge, gulping breath. Heading for his bed, I flop onto it and stare at the plain white ceiling.

Holy cow… that has to be without doubt one of the most excruciating confrontations I've ever had to endure… and now I feel numb. My fiancé and his ex-lover – no would-be bride should have to see that. Having said that, part of me is glad she's revealed her true self, and that I was there to bear witness.

My thoughts turn to Esme. Poor Esme… to hear all that. I clutch one of Edward's pillows. She'll have overheard that Edward and Irina had an affair – but not the nature of it… thank heavens.

I groan.

What *am* I taking on board? Perhaps the evil witch had a point. No, I refuse to believe that. She's so cold – so cruel. I shake my head… she's wrong. I *am* right for Edward. I am what he needs. And in a moment of stunning clarity, I don't question *how* he's lived his life until recently – but *why*. His reasons for doing what he's done to countless girls – I don't even want to know how many. The *how* isn't wrong – they were all adults. They were all – how did Banner put it? – in safe, sane, consensual relationships. It's the *why*. The why was wrong. The why was from his place of darkness. I close my eyes and drape my arm over them. But now he's moved on, left it behind, and we are both in the light. I am dazzled by him, and he by me… we can guide each other.

A thought occurs to me.

Shit!

A gnawing, insidious thought… and I'm in the one place where I can lay this ghost to rest. I sit up. Yes… I must do this.

Shakily, I get to my feet, kick off my shoes, walk over to his desk, and examine the pin board above it. The photos of young Edward are all still there… more poignant than ever as I think of the spectacle I've just witnessed between him and Mrs. Robinson. And there in the corner is the small black and white photo… his mother… the crack whore. I switch on the desk lamp and focus the light on her picture. I don't even know her name. She looks so much like him… but younger and sadder… and all I feel, looking at her sorrowful face, is… compassion. I try to see the similarities between her face and mine. I squint at the picture, get really, really close… and see... none. Except maybe our hair… and I think hers is lighter than mine. I don't look like her at all. The thought is – pleasing… a relief even.

My subconscious tuts at me, arms crossed, glaring over her half-moon glasses. Why are you torturing yourself? You've said yes. You've made your bed. I purse my lips at her. Yes, I have, gladly so. I want to lie in that bed with Edward for the rest of my life.

My inner goddess, sitting in the lotus position, smiles serenely…

Yes. I've made the right decision.

I must find him – Edward will be worried. I have no idea how long I've been in his room… he'll think that I've fled. I roll my eyes as I contemplate his over-reaction. Hopefully, he and Esme have finished… I shudder to think what she might have said to him.

I meet Edward as he climbs the stairs to the second floor, looking for me. His face is strained and weary – not the carefree Fifty I arrived with. As I stand on the landing, he stops on the top stair, so that we are eye to eye.

"Hi," he says cautiously.

"Hi," I answer warily.

"I was worried – "

"I know," I interrupt him. "I'm sorry – I couldn't face the festivities. I just had to get away… you know. To think." Reaching up, I caress his face. He closes his eyes and leans his face into my hand.

"And you'd thought you'd do that in my room?"

"Yes."

He reaches for my hand and pulls me into an embrace, and I go willingly into his arms, my favorite place in the whole world. He smells of fresh laundry, body wash, and Edward… the most calming and arousing scent on the planet. He inhales, his nose in my hair.

"I'm sorry you had to endure all that."

"It's not your fault, Edward. Why was she here?"

He gazes down at me, and his mouth curls apologetically. "She's a family friend."

I try not to react. "Not anymore. How's your mom?"

"Mom is pretty fucking mad at me right now. I'm really glad you're here, and that we're in the middle of a party. Otherwise, I might be breathing my last."

"That bad, huh?"

He nods, his eyes serious, and I sense his bewilderment at her reaction.

"Can you blame her?" My voice is quiet, cajoling.

He hugs me tightly… and he seems uncertain, processing his thoughts. Finally, he answers.

"No."

Whoa! Breakthrough…

"Can we sit?" I ask.

"Sure. Here?"

I nod, and we both sit at the top of the stairs.

"So how do you feel?" I ask, anxiously clutching his hand and gazing at his sad, serious face.

He sighs, and runs his free hand through his hair.

"I feel… liberated." He shrugs, then beams at me – a glorious, carefree Edward smile, and the weariness and strain present moments ago… vanishes.

"Really?" I beam back. Wow… I'd crawl over broken glass for that smile.

"Our business relationship is over. Done."

I frown at him. "Will you liquidate the salon business?"

He snorts. "I'm not that vindictive, Isabella," he admonishes me. "No. I'll gift them to her. I'll talk to my lawyer Monday. I owe her that much."

I arch an eyebrow at him. "No more Mrs. Robinson?"

His mouth twists in amusement, and he shakes his head. "Gone."

I grin. "Well… I'm sorry you lost a friend."

He shrugs, then smirks. "Are you?"

"No," I confess, flushing.

"Come." He stands and offers me his hand. "Let's join the party in our honor… I might even get drunk."

"Do you get drunk?" I ask as I take his hand.

"Not since I was a wild teenager…" We walk down the stairs. "Have you eaten?" he asks.

Oh… no.

"No."

"Well, you should. From the smell of Irina, that was one of my father's lethal cocktails you threw over her." He gazes at me, trying and failing to keep the amusement off his face.

"Edward, I – "

He holds up his hand. "No arguing Isabella. If you're going to drink – and throw alcohol over my exes – you need to eat. It's rule number one. I believe we've already had that discussion, after our first night together."

Oh yes… The Heathman.

Back in the hallway, he pauses to caress my face, his fingers skimming my jaw.

"I laid awake and watched you sleep for hours," he murmurs. "I may have loved you even then."

Oh…

He leans down and kisses me, softly… and I melt… everywhere, all the tension of the last hour or so seeping languidly from my body.

"Eat," he breathes.

"Okay," I acquiesce, because right now, I'd probably do anything for him. Taking my hand, he leads me towards the kitchen, where the party is in full swing.

-x-

"Goodnight, John, Rhian."

"Congratulations again, Bella. You two will be just fine." Dr. Banner smiles kindly at us, standing arm in arm in the hallway, as he and Rhian take their leave.

"Goodnight."

Edward closes the door and shakes his head. He gazes down at me, his eyes suddenly bright with excitement.

What's this?

"Just the family left. I think my mother has had too much to drink."

Esme is singing karaoke on some games console in the family room. Rose and Alice are giving her a run for her money.

"Do you blame her?" I smirk at him, trying to keep the atmosphere between us light. I succeed.

"Are you smirking at me, Miss Swan?"

"I am."

"It's been quite a day."

"Edward, recently, every day with you has been quite a day." My voice is sardonic.

He shakes his head slightly. "Fair point, well made, Miss Swan. Come – I want to show you something." Taking my hand, he leads me through the house to the kitchen, where Carlisle, Jasper and Emmett are talking Mariners, drinking the last of the cocktails and eating leftovers.

"Off for a stroll?" Emmett teases suggestively as we make our way through the French doors. Edward ignores him. Carlisle frowns at Emmett, shaking his head in a silent rebuke.

As we make our way up the steps to the lawn, I take off my shoes. The half moon shines brightly over the bay. It's dazzling, casting everything in myriad shades of grey as the lights of Seattle twinkle sweetly in the distance. The lights of the boathouse are on, a soft glowing beacon in the cool cast of the moon.

"Edward, I'd like to go to church tomorrow."

"Oh?"

"Well… I prayed you'd come back alive… and you have. It's the least I could do."

"Okay."

We wander hand-in-hand in a relaxed silence for a few moments… then something occurs to me.

"Where are you going to put the photos Jake took of me?"

"I thought we might put them in the new house."

"You bought it?"

He stops to stare at me, and I can hear the concern in his voice. "Yes. I thought you liked it."

"I do. When did you buy it?"

"Yesterday morning. Now we need to decide what to do with it," he murmurs, relieved.

"Don't knock it down. Please. It's such a lovely house. It just needs some tender loving care."

Edward glances at me and smiles. "Okay. I'll talk to Emmett – see if he can do the work."

I snort, suddenly remembering the last time we crossed the lawn under the moonlight to the boathouse. Oh… perhaps that's what we're going to do now. I grin.

"What?"

"I remember the last time you took me to the boathouse."

Edward chuckles quietly. "Oh, that was fun. In fact…"

He suddenly stops and scoops me over his shoulder, and I squeal, though we don't have far to go.

"You were really angry, if I remember correctly," I gasp.

"Isabella, I'm always really angry."

"No, you're not."

He swats my behind as he stops outside the wooden door. He slides me down his body back to the ground, and takes my head in his hands.

"No, not anymore." Leaning down, he kisses me, hard… when he pulls away, I'm breathless, and desire is racing round my body.

He gazes down at me, and in the glow of the striplight from inside the boathouse, I can see he's anxious. My anxious man… not a white knight or a dark knight, a man – a beautiful, not-quite-so-fucked-up man, whom I love. I reach up and caress his face, running my fingers through his sideburns and along his jaw to his chin… then let my index finger touch his lips. He relaxes slightly.

"I've something to show you in here," he murmurs, and opens the door.

The harsh light of the fluorescents illuminates the impressive motor launch in the dock, bobbing gently on the dark water. There's a rowing boat beside it.

"Come." Edward takes my hand and leads me up the wooden stairs. Opening the door at the top, he steps aside to let me in.

My mouth drops to the floor. The attic is unrecognizable. The room is filled with flowers… there are flowers everywhere. Someone has created a magical bower –beautiful wild meadow flowers mixed with glowing fairy lights and miniature lanterns that glow soft and pale round the room.

My face whips round to meet his, and he's gazing at me, his face unreadable. He shrugs.

"You wanted hearts and flowers," he murmurs.

I blink at him, not quite believing what I'm seeing.

"You have my heart…" He waves towards the room.

"And here are the flowers," I whisper, completing his sentence. "Edward, it's lovely." I can't think of what else to say. My heart is in my mouth…

Tugging my hand, he pulls me further into the room, and before I know it… he's sinking to one knee in front of me. *Holy hell… I did not expect this!* I stop breathing.

From his inside jacket pocket, he produces a ring, and gazes up at me, his eyes bright green and raw, full of emotion.

"Isabella Swan. I love you. I want to love, cherish, and protect you for the rest of my life. Be mine. Always. Share my life with me. Marry me."

I blink down at him, tears pricking my eyes. My Fifty, my man. I love him so... and all I can say as the tidal wave of emotion hits me is…

"Yes…"

He grins, relieved, and slowly slides the ring on my finger. It's beautiful… an oval diamond. Jeez – it's big… big, but oh-so-simple… stunning in its simplicity.

"Oh, Edward," I sob, suddenly overwhelmed with joy, and I join him on my knees, my fingers fisting in his hair as I kiss him, kiss him with all my heart and soul. Kiss this beautiful man, who loves me as I love him… and as he wraps his arms around me, his hands moving to my hair, his mouth on mine, I know deep down I will always be his, and he will always be mine. We've come so far together, we have so far to go, but we are made for each other. We are meant to be.

-x-
-xxx-

The cigarette end glows brightly in the darkness as he takes a deep pull. He blows the smoke out in a long exhale, finishing with two smoke rings that dissolve in front of him, pale and ghostly in the moonlight. He shifts in his seat, bored, and takes a quick shot of cheap bourbon from a bottle shabbily wrapped in brown paper before resting it back between his thighs.

He can't believe he's still on the trail. His mouth twists in a sardonic sneer. The helicopter had been a rash and bold move. One of the most exhilarating things he'd ever done in his life. But to no avail. He rolls his eyes ironically. Who would have thought the son-of-a-bitch could actually fly the fucker?

He snorts.

They have underestimated him. If Cullen thought for one minute he'd go whimpering quietly into the dusk, that prick didn't know jack shit.

It's been the same all his life. People constantly underestimating him – just a man who reads books. Fuck that! A man with a photographic memory who reads books. Oh, the things he's learned, the things he knows. He snorts again – yeah, about you, Cullen. The things I know about you.

Not bad for a kid from the trailer-trash end of Detroit.

Not bad for the kid who won a scholarship to Princeton.

Not bad for the kid who worked his ass off through college and got into publishing.

And now all of that's fucked, fucked because of Cullen and his little bitch. He scowls at the house as if it represents everything he despises. But there's nothing doing. The only drama had been the stacked blonde broad in black, teetering down the driveway in tears, before she climbed into the white CLK and fucked off.

He chuckles mirthlessly, then winces. Fuck, his ribs. Still sore from the swift kicking Cullen's henchman delivered.

He replays the scene in his mind.

"You fucking touch Miss Swan again, I'll fucking kill you."

That cunt will get it good, too. Yeah – get what's coming to him.

He settles back in the car seat. Looks like it's going to be a long night. He'll stay and watch and wait. He takes another toke of his Marlboro red. His chance will come. His chance will come soon.

The End…

Master of the Universe II

Chapter 88/1

I stare up through gaps in the seagrass parasol at the bluest of skies, Mediterranean blue… I can't help my contented sigh. Edward is beside me, stretched out on a sun lounger. My husband – my hot, beautiful husband, shirtless and in cut-off jeans – is reading a book predicting the collapse of the Western banking system. By all accounts it's a page-turner… I haven't seen him sit this still, ever. He looks more like a student than the hotshot CEO of one the US's top privately owned companies.

We laze on the beach of the Fairmont Monte Carlo in Monaco, on the final leg of our honeymoon, although we're not actually staying here… I open my eyes and gaze out at The Fair Lady anchored in the harbor. We are staying, of course, on board a luxury motor yacht. Built in 1928, she floats majestically on the water, queen of the all the yachts in the harbor. She looks like a child's wind-up toy. Edward loves her – I suspect he's tempted to buy her. Honestly, boys and their toys…

I sit back, listening to the Edward Cullen mix on my iPod, and doze in the late afternoon sun, idly remembering his proposal… hmmm…

***

"Can we marry tomorrow?" Edward murmurs softly in my ear. I am sprawled on his chest in our flowery bower in the boathouse, sated from his passionate lovemaking.

"Hmmm," I murmur.

"Is that a yes?" I can hear his surprise.

"Hmmm."

"A no?"

"Hmmm."

I can feel his grin.

"Miss Swan, are you incoherent?"

I grin.

"Hmmm."

He laughs and hugs me tightly, kissing the top of my head.

"Vegas, tomorrow, it is then."

Sleepily I raise my head.

"I don't think my parents would be very happy with that."

He thrums his fingertips up and down my naked back, caressing me gently.

"What do you want, Isabella? Vegas? A big wedding with all the trimmings? Tell me."

"Not big… Just friends and family." I gaze up at him searching his glowing green eyes. *What does he want?*

"Okay," he nods. "Where?"

I shrug.

"Could we do it here?" he asks tentatively.

"Your folks' place? Would they mind?"

He snorts.

"My mother would be in seventh heaven."

"Okay, here," I agree. "I'm sure my Mom and Dad would prefer that."

He strokes my hair tenderly. Could I be any happier?

"So, we've established where… Now the when."

"Surely you should ask your mother."

"Hmmm." Edward's mouth dips. "She can have a month, that's it. I want you too much to wait any longer."

"Edward, you have me. You've had me for a while. But okay – a month it is." I kiss his chest, a soft chaste kiss, and smile up at him.

***

"You'll burn."

Edward whispers in my ear, startling me from my doze.

"Only for you," I smile shyly at him, though the late afternoon sun has shifted and I am under its full glare. He smirks at me and in one swift move pulls my sun lounger into the shade of the parasol.

"Out of the Mediterranean sun, Mrs Cullen. I don't want you to burn," he breathes.

Oh! That would not be good.

"Thank you for your altruism, Mr Cullen."

"My pleasure, Mrs Cullen… and I'm not being altruistic at all. If you burn, I won't be able to touch you." He raises an eyebrow at me, his green eyes shining with mirth, and my heart expands. "But I suspect you know that and you're laughing at me," he adds.

"Would I?" I gasp feigning innocence.

"Yes you would, and you do. Often. It's one of the many things I love about you." He leans down and kisses me, biting my lower lip playfully.

"I was hoping you'd slather me in sun tan lotion." I pout against his lips.

"Oh Mrs Cullen… it's a dirty job – but that's an offer I can't refuse. Sit up," he orders softly, his voice husky. I do as I'm bid and very slowly, very meticulously, his fingers strong and supple as always, he gently coats me in sun lotion…

"You really are very lovely. I'm a lucky man," he murmurs as his fingers skim over my breasts, spreading the lotion.

"Hmmm… yes you are, Mr Cullen," I breathe gazing up at him through my lashes.

"Modesty becomes you, Mrs Cullen. Turn over. I want to do your back."

Smiling, I do as I'm told, and he gently undoes the back strap of my hideously expensive bikini.

"How would you feel if I went topless, like the other women here?" I ask.

"Displeased," he says immediately. "I'm not very happy about you wearing so little right now." He leans down and whispers in my ear. "Don't push your luck."

"Is that a challenge, Mr Cullen?"

"No. It's a statement of fact, Mrs Cullen."

I sigh and shake my head. Oh Edward… my possessive, jealous, control-freak Edward.

When he's finished he slaps my behind.

"You'll do, wench."

His ever-present, ever-active BlackBerry buzzes. I frown at him and he smirks at me.

"My eyes only, Mrs Cullen." He raises his eyebrow in playful warning, slaps my backside once more, and sits back down on his lounger to take the call.

My inner goddess purrs. Maybe tonight we could do some kind of floorshow… for his eyes only, she smirks knowingly. I grin at the thought and drift back into my afternoon reverie…

***

"Look at this!" squeals Alice.

We are seated around the Cullen kitchen table enjoying a leisurely breakfast of pancakes, bacon and scrambled eggs, the day after Edward's birthday. Edward and I spent the night in his childhood bedroom. After his lengthy conversation with Carlisle last night, an introspective and taciturn Edward had felt inclined to drink a very large brandy, so Esme insisted we stay. Emmett and Rose have spent the night too. Now Emmett, Rose, Esme and I are debating the merits of bacon versus sausages, while Carlisle and Edward read the Sunday papers.

We all turn expectantly towards Alice, who has her netbook open on the table.

"There's a gossipy item on the Seattle Nooz Website – about you being engaged, Edward."

"Already?" Esme says in surprise. Then her mouth purses as some obviously unpleasant thought crosses her mind. Edward frowns.

Alice reads out loud:

"*Word has reached us here at The Nooz that Seattle's most eligible bachelor* ***the*** *Edward Cullen has finally been snapped up, and wedding bells are in the air. But who is the lucky, lucky lady? The Nooz is on the hunt. Bet she's reading one helluva pre-nup. Let's hope she's got one smartass lawyer.*"

Alice giggles… then stops abruptly as Edward glares at her. Silence descends and the atmosphere in the Cullen kitchen is suddenly thick and heavy with tension.

Oh No! A pre-nup?

The thought hadn't even crossed my mind. I swallow, feeling all the blood drain from my face… please, ground, swallow me up now! Edward shifts uncomfortably in his chair as I glance apprehensively at him.

No, he mouths at me.

"Edward…" Carlisle says gently.

"I'm not discussing this again," Edward snaps at Carlisle.

Carlisle glances at me nervously and goes to say something.

"No pre-nup!" Edward almost shouts at him, and broodingly goes back to reading his paper, ignoring everyone else at the table. They look alternately at me then him… then anywhere but at the two of us.

"Edward," I murmur. "I'll sign anything you and Dr Cullen want." Jeez, it wouldn't be the first time he's made me sign something.

Edward looks up and glares angrily at me.

"No!" he snaps.

I blanch once more.

"It's to protect you," I mutter, acknowledging the elephant in the room.

"Edward, Bella – I think you should discuss this in private," Esme admonishes us quietly. She glares at Carlisle and Alice… Oh dear, looks like they're in trouble too.

"Bella, this is not about you," Carlisle murmurs reassuringly. "And please call me Carlisle."

Edward narrows cold green eyes at Carlisle and my heart sinks. Hell… he's really mad.

Everyone erupts into animated conversation apart from Alice and Rose who leap up to clear the table.

"I definitely prefer sausages," exclaims Emmett.

I stare down at my knotted fingers… Holy crap. I hope Mr and Mrs Cullen don't think I'm some kind of gold digger. Edward reaches across and grasps both my hands gently in one of his.

"Stop it," he warns.

Crap! How does he know what I'm thinking?

"Mom," he says. "Can we have the wedding here?"

"Here?" Esme squeaks, going slightly pink. Her eyes are suddenly shining with delight.

"Yeah," Edward smiles at her, his sour mood forgotten, just like that. My sweet, mercurial Fifty.

"Of course! Oh Edward, Bella… we'd be delighted. Wouldn't we, Carlisle?"

Carlisle smiles indulgently at his wife and the mood around the whole table lifts.

"We would. We'd be honored," he says, his voice ringing with kind sincerity.

Edward barely smiles at Carlisle – I suspect that he's still smarting from 'the talk' they had last night – and he turns back to Esme.

"You have a month," he says.

"Two," Esme counters, grinning.

"Five weeks," Edward responds, his eyes shining wickedly at his Mom.

"Seven."

"Six weeks, or it's Vegas."

"Done!" Esme claps her hands, and Alice and Rose turn and grin at each other. Emmett rolls his eyes… *oh, it's a family trait.*

"I hope you're going to let me be maid of honor," Rose smiles warmly at me… and I think she's embarrassed for me, given the previous topic of conversation. I smile gratefully at her.

"Please," I whisper. She lights up.

And just like that, the date is set for August 1st.

Later, in the car as we head back to Escala, Edward is quiet and thoughtful. I am plucking up the courage to mention the pre-nup.

"Ignore my Dad," Edward says suddenly. "He's really pissed about Irina. That stuff was all aimed at me… I wish my Mom had kept her mouth shut," he mutters darkly.

Oh! This is news. Edward had been so tight-lipped after his talk with Carlisle – I knew it hadn't gone well. I want to make some comment about married people not keeping secrets from each other and sharing their problems, but now doesn't seem the right time… but on the other hand – carpe diem.

"He has a point, Edward. You're very wealthy, and I'm bringing nothing to our marriage but my student debt."

Edward glances at me, his brow furrowed, his green eyes cold.

"Isabella, if you leave me, you might as well take everything," he says simply, his expression bleak. "You left me once before. I know how that feels."

Holy Fuck!

"That was different," I whisper, moved by his intensity. "But… you might want to leave me." The thought makes me feel sick.

He snorts.

"Yeah, right." He shakes his head with mock disgust.

"Edward, you know… I might do something exceptionally stupid – and you…" I glance down at my knotted hands, pain lancing through me. Losing Edward… *fuck.*

"Stop. Stop now. This subject is closed, Isabella. We're not discussing it any more. No pre-nup. Not now – not ever."

Edward puts his foot down on the gas and I'm momentarily thrown back in my seat. And just like that, the words pre and nup are not mentioned again in his presence.

Jeez – he's so stubborn and bossy…

***

"Mam'selle? Un Perrier pour moi, un Coca-Cola light pour ma femme, s'il vous plait. Et de quoi manger… faîtes-moi voir la carte?"

Hmm… Edward speaking fluent French wakes me, dragging me back to the now. My eyelashes flutter in the glare of the sun and I find Edward watching me while a liveried young woman walks away, her tray held aloft, her high blond ponytail swinging provocatively.

"Thirsty?" he asks.

"Yes," I mutter sleepily.

"I could watch you all day. Tired?"

I flush.

"Well… I didn't get much sleep last night."

"Me neither." He grins, puts down his BlackBerry and stands. His shorts fall a little and hang… in that way… so I can see his trunks beneath. Very slowly, and slightly distracted for some reason, Edward takes his shorts off, stepping out of his flip-flops. I lose my train of thought.

"Come for a swim with me." He holds out his hand while I gaze up at him, dazed.

"Swim?" he says again, cocking his head to one side, a bemused look on his face. When I don't respond he shakes his head slowly.

"Looks like you need a wake-up." And suddenly he pounces, reaching down and lifting me into his arms, while I shriek, more from surprise than alarm.

"Edward! Put Me Down!" I choke out, laughing and squealing.

He chuckles.

"Only in the sea, baby."

Several sunbathers on the beach watch – with that bemused disinterest so typical of the French – as Edward carries me to the sea, laughing, and wades in, my arms clasped around his neck.

"You wouldn't?" I ask breathlessly, trying to stifle my giggling.

He grins down at me.

"Oh Bella, baby… have you learned nothing in the short time we've known each other?" He leans down and kisses me, and I seize my opportunity, running my fingers through his hair, grasping two handfuls and kissing him back, invading his mouth with my tongue. I feel his sharp intake of breath and he pulls back, green eyes wide and wild.

"I know your game," he whispers and he slowly sinks into the cool, clear water, his lips finding mine once more. The chill of the Mediterranean is soon forgotten as I wrap myself around my husband.

"I thought you wanted to swim," I murmur against his mouth.

"You're very distracting." Edward runs his nose along my jaw. "But I'm not sure I want to give the good people of Monte Carlo a peepshow." I run my teeth along his jaw, his stubble tickly against my tongue.

"Bella," he groans. He wraps his wrist around my ponytail and tugs gently, tilting my head right back, exposing my neck… He trails kisses from my ear down to my throat.

"Shall I take you in the sea?" he breathes.

"Yes…" I whisper. My inner goddess is beside herself.

Edward pulls away and gazes down at me, his green eyes warm, wanting and amused.

"Mrs Cullen, you're insatiable – and so… brazen. What sort of monster have I created?"

"A monster fit for you," I murmur. "Would you have me any other way?"

"I'll take you any way I can get you. But not right now. Not with an audience." He jerks his head towards the shore.

What?

Sure enough, several sunbathers on the beach have abandoned their indifference and now regard us with interest. Suddenly Edward grabs me around my waist and launches me into the air, letting me fall into the water and sink to the soft sand below. I surface, coughing, spluttering and giggling… and I'd thought we were going to…

"Edward!" I scold, putting my hands on my hips and glaring at him. He bites his lower lip to stifle his amusement. I splash him, and he splashes me right back.

"We have all night," he says, grinning like a fool. "Laters, baby." He dives beneath the sea and surfaces three feet away from me, then in a fluid, graceful crawl swims away from the shore, away from me.

Gah! Playful, tantalizing Fifty! I shield my eyes from the sun as I watch him go. He's such a tease… what can I do to get him back? I swim back to the shore and wade out of the sea, hopping across the hot sand to our sun loungers. Our drinks have arrived and I take a quick sip of Coke. Edward is a faint speck in the distance.

Hmmm… I lie down, take my bikini top off, and toss it casually onto Edward's sun lounger. There… see how brazen I can be, Mr Cullen? Put this in your pipe and smoke it. I shut my eyes and drift away under the heat of the sun…

***

"You may kiss the bride," Reverend Walsh gushes.

I beam up at my husband.

"Finally, you're mine," he whispers, and he pulls me into his arms, and kisses me chastely on the lips.

I am married. I am Mrs Edward Cullen. I am giddy with joy.

"You look beautiful, Bella," he murmurs appreciatively, smiling warmly down at me. "Don't let anyone take that dress off but me, understand?" His smile heats a hundred degrees and his green eyes glow as his fingertips trail down my cheek, igniting my blood. *Holy crap… How does he do this?*

I flush, and nod mutely. Jeez, I hope no one can hear us… luckily Reverend Walsh has discreetly stepped back. I glance at the throng gathered in their wedding finery… My Mom, Charlie, Phil, and the Cullens are all applauding – even maid of honor Rose, looking stunning in pale pink as she stands beside Emmett, Edward's best man. Who knew Emmett could scrub up so well? All wear huge, beaming smiles – except Esme, who weeps graciously into a dainty white handkerchief.

"Ready to party, Mrs Cullen?" Edward murmurs, giving me his shy smile. I melt. He looks dazzling, in a simple black tux with silver waistcoat and tie. He's so… *dashing.*

"Ready as I'll ever be." I grin, a totally goofy smile on my face.

*

I gaze at the wedding party in full swing… Carlisle and Esme have gone to town. They have the marquee set up again, beautifully decorated in pale pink, silver and ivory, its sides open facing the bay. We have been blessed with fine weather, and the late afternoon sun shines over the water. There's a dance floor at one end of the marquee, a lavish buffet at the other. Charlie and my mother are dancing and laughing with each other. I feel bittersweet watching them together… I hope Edward and I last longer. I don't know what I'd do if he left me. *Marry in Haste, Repent in Leisure…* the saying haunts me. Rose is beside me, looking so beautiful in her long pale rose silk gown. She glances at me and frowns.

"Hey, this is supposed to be the happiest day of your life," she scolds.

"It is." I whisper.

"Oh Bella, what's wrong? Are you watching your parents?"

I nod at her sadly.

"They're happy," she says kindly.

"Happier apart."

"You're having doubts?" Rose asks, alarmed.

"No… not at all… it's just… I love him so much…" I freeze, unable or unwilling to articulate my fears.

"Bella, it's obvious he adores you. I know you had an… unconventional start to your relationship, but I can see how happy you've both been over the past month." She grasps my hands, squeezing them. "Besides, it's too late now!" she adds, grinning at me.

I giggle. Trust Rose to point out the obvious. She pulls me into a Rosalie Hale Special Hug.

"Bella, you'll be fine. And if he does hurt one hair on your head, he'll have me to answer to." Releasing me, she grins at whoever is behind me.

"Hi baby." Edward puts his arms around me, surprising me, and nuzzles my neck. "Rose," he acknowledges. He's still cool towards her, even after six weeks.

"Hello again, Edward. I'm off to find your best man… who happens to be my best man too. " With a smile to us both she heads over to Emmett, who is drinking with Jasper and Jake.

“Time to go,” Edward murmurs.

“Already? This is the first party I’ve been to where I don’t mind being the centre of attention,” I murmur, turning in his arms to face him.

“You deserve to be. You look stunning, Isabella.”

“So do you.”

He smiles down at me… his expression heating.

“This beautiful dress becomes you.”

“This old thing?” I flush shyly and pull at the fine chiffon over-skirt of the wedding dress designed for me by Rose’s mother.

He bends and kisses me gently.

“Let’s go. I don’t want to share you with all these people any more.”

“Can we leave our own wedding?”

“Baby, it’s our party – we can do what we want. We’ve cut the cake. And right now, I’d like to whisk you away and have you all to myself.”

I giggle.

“You have me for a lifetime, Mr Cullen.”

“I’m very glad to hear that, Mrs Cullen.”

“Oh there you two are! Such lovebirds.”

I groan inwardly… Esme’s mother has found us.

“Edward, darling – one more dance with your grandma?”

Edward’s lips purse slightly.

“Of course, Grandmother.”

“And you, beautiful Isabella, go and make an old man happy – dance with Grandpa Platt.”

“It’ll be my pleasure, Mrs Platt.”

"Oh, I think you can call me Grandma. Now, you two seriously need to get working on my great grandkids. I won't last too much longer." She twinkles at us both. Edward blinks at her in horror.

"Come, Grandmother," he says, hurriedly taking her hand and leading her towards the dance floor. He glances back at me and rolls his eyes. "Laters, baby," he practically pouts.

As I make my way to Grandpa Platt Jake accosts me.

"I won't ask you for another dance. I think I monopolized too much of your time on the dance floor as it is… but I'm serious, Bells. I'll be here… If you need me."

Shit… he's had too much to drink.

I know Jake means well, but his attention is unwelcome.

"Jake, thank you. I'll bear your kind words in mind… I think they're serving coffee in the marquee."

His mouth twists.

"I mean it," he says, his dark eyes burning with an emotion I don't want to name.

"I know you do. Thank you, Jake. But please excuse me – I have a date with an old man."

He blinks at me in incomprehension.

"Edward's grandfather," I clarify.

He grins.

"Good luck with that Bells. Good luck with everything."

"Thanks, Jake."

*

I stand by the French doors watching the sun sink slowly over Seattle, casting bright orange and aquamarine shadows across the bay.

"Let's go," Edward urges.

"I have to change." I grasp his hand, meaning to pull him through the French windows and upstairs with me. He frowns, not understanding, and tugs gently on my hand, halting me.

"I thought you wanted to be the one to take this dress off," I explain. His eyes light up.

"Correct." He grins lasciviously at me. "But I'm not undressing you here. We wouldn't leave until… I don't know…" He waves his long-fingered hand, leaving his sentence unfinished but his meaning quite clear.

Oh… I flush and let go of his hand.

"And don't take your hair down either," he murmurs darkly.

"But…"

"No buts, Isabella. You look beautiful. And I want to be the one to undress you."

Oh… I frown.

"Pack your going-away clothes," he orders softly. "You'll need them. Taylor has your main suitcase."

"Ok." What has he got planned? He hasn't told me where we're going. In fact I don't think anyone knows where we're going. Even Alice hasn't managed to inveigle the information out of him. I turn to where Rose and my mother are hovering nearby.

"I'm not changing."

"What?" says my mother.

"Edward doesn't want me to." I shrug as if this should explain everything. Her brow furrows briefly.

"You didn't promise to obey," she reminds me tactfully. Rose tries to disguise her snort as a cough. I narrow my eyes at her. Neither she nor my mother have any idea of the row Edward and I had about that! I so don't want to rehash that argument. Jeez, can my Fifty Shades sulk… I sigh at the memory.

"I know Mom, but he likes this dress, and I want to please him." I blush.

Her expression softens. Rose rolls her eyes and tactfully moves away to leave me alone with my mother.

"You look so lovely, darling." Renee gently tugs at a loose tendril of my hair and strokes my chin. "I am so proud of you, honey. You're going to make Edward a very happy man." She pulls me into a hug… oh Mom! "I can't believe how grown-up you look right

now. Beginning a new life… Just remember that men are from a different planet, and you'll be fine."

I giggle. Edward is from a different universe… if only she knew.

"Thanks Mom."

Charlie joins us, smiling sweetly at both Mom and me.

"We did good, eh Renee?" he says, his eyes glowing with pride. He looks so dapper in his black tux and pale pink waistcoat. Tears prick the back of my eyes. Oh no… so far I have managed not to cry.

"We sure did, Charlie," Renee replies.

"You make one hell of a bride, Bells," Charlie tucks the same loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"Oh Dad…" I stifle a sob and he hugs me, briefly.

"You'll make one hell of a wife too, baby," he whispers, his voice hoarse.

When he releases me Edward is back at my side. Charlie shakes his hand warmly.

"Look after my baby girl, Edward."

"I fully intend to, Charlie. Renee." He shakes hands with my Dad and kisses my Mom. The rest of the wedding guests have formed a human arch for us to travel through, leading round to the front of the house.

"Ready?" Edward says.

"Yes."

Taking my hand he leads me through while our guests shout good luck and congratulations, and shower us with rice. At the end of the arch Esme and Carlisle are waiting, and they hug and kiss us both. We bid them hasty goodbyes, and I toss my bouquet of white and pink roses into the crowd of young women that has hastily gathered. Alice triumphantly holds it aloft, grinning from ear to ear.

Taylor is waiting to whisk us away in the Merc.

Edward holds the car door open and bends to help me with the hem of my dress as I climb in. Taylor holds the door open for Edward.

"Congratulations, Sir," Taylor murmurs.

"Thank you," Edward replies as he seats himself beside me.

As Taylor pulls away the car is showered with rice from behind us. Edward grasps my hand and kisses my knuckles.

"So far so good, Mrs Cullen?"

"So far so wonderful, Mr Cullen. Where are we going?"

"Sea Tac," he says simply, and smiles a sphinx-like smile. *Hmmm…* what is he planning?

Taylor does not head for the departure terminal, but towards a part of the airport I have never been to… through a security gate and on to the tarmac… What? And then I see her – Edward's jet… *Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc* in large blue lettering across her fuselage.

"Don't tell me you're misusing company property again?" I exclaim.

"Oh, I hope so, Isabella." Edward grins.

Taylor halts at the foot of the steps leading up to the plane, and leaps out of the Merc to open Edward's door. They have a brief discussion, then Edward opens my door – and rather than stepping back to give me room to step out, he leans in and lifts me…

Whoa!

"What are you doing?" I squeak.

"Carrying you over the threshold," he says.

"Oh…" Isn't that supposed to be at home?

He carries me effortlessly up the steps, and Taylor follows with my small suitcase. He leaves it on the threshold of the plane before disappearing back down to the Merc. Inside the cabin I recognize Stephan in his pilot's uniform.

"Welcome aboard, Sir, Mrs Cullen." He grins at us both.

Edward puts me down and shakes Stephan's hand. Beside Stephan stands a dark-haired woman in her what? Early thirties? Also in uniform.

"Congratulations to you both," Stephan continues.

"Thank you, Stephan. Isabella, you know Stephan. He's our Captain today, and this is First Officer Beighley."

She flushes as Edward introduces her and blinks rapidly. I want to roll my eyes. Another female completely captivated by my too-handsome-for-his-own-good husband.

"Delighted to meet you," gushes Beighley, and blushes some more. I smile kindly at her. After all – he is mine.

"All preparations complete?" Edward asks them both as I glance around the cabin. The interior is all pale maple wood and pale cream leather… it's lovely. Another young woman in uniform stands at the other end of the cabin… a very pretty brunette. *Who the hell is that?*

"We have the all-clear. Weather is good from here to Boston."

Boston?

"Turbulence?"

"Not before Boston. There's a weather front over Shannon which might give us a rough ride."

Shannon? Ireland?

"I see. Well, I hope to sleep through it all," says Edward matter-of-factly.

Sleep?

"We'll get underway sir," Stephan says. "We'll leave you in the capable care of Natalia, your flight attendant." Edward glances in her direction and frowns slightly, but turns to Stephan with a smile.

"Excellent," he says. Taking my hand he leads me to one of the sumptuous leather seats. There must be about twelve of them in total.

"Sit," he says.

We sit in two single seats facing each other with a small, highly polished table between us.

"Welcome aboard sir, ma'am, and congratulations." Natalia is at our side, offering us both a glass of pink champagne.

"Thank you," Edward says coolly, scrutinizing her, but she for a change seems immune to his charms. She smiles politely at us and retreats to the galley.

"Here's to a happy married life, Isabella." Edward raises his glass to mine, and we chink. The champagne is delicious.

"Bollinger?" I ask.

"The same."

Last time I drank this it was out of teacups. I grin at him.

"Where are we going?" I ask, unable to contain my curiosity any longer.

"Boston. To refuel," Edward teases, his eyes alight with excitement. He looks like a small boy.

"Then?" I prompt.

"Shannon. To refuel."

"Edward!"

"London," he says softly, gazing intently at me, trying to gauge my reaction.

I gasp. Holy Crow… I thought idly maybe we'd be going to Aspen or New York. I can hardly believe it. My lifetime ambition has been to visit England. I feel lit up from within… incandescent with happiness.

"Then Paris," he adds.

What?

"Then the South of France."

Whoa!

"I know you've always dreamed of going to Europe," he says softly. "I want to make your dreams come true, Isabella."

"You are my dreams come true, Edward."

"Back at you, Mrs Cullen," he whispers.

Oh my…

"Buckle up."

I grin and do as I'm told, as the plane taxis out on to the runway.

*

We have eaten a delicious wedding feast – smoked salmon, followed by roast partridge with a green bean salad and dauphinoise potatoes, all cooked and served by the ever-efficient Natalia.

"Dessert, Mr Cullen?" she asks.

He shakes his head and runs his finger across his bottom lip as he looks questioningly at me, his green eyes dark and unreadable.

"No, thank you," I murmur, unable to break eye contact with him. He smiles slightly and Natalia retreats.

"Good," he murmurs. "I'd rather planned on having you for dessert."

Oh… here?

"Come," he says, rising from the table and offering me his hand. He leads me to the end of the cabin.

"There's a bathroom here…" He points to a small door, then leads me on down a short corridor and through a door at the end.

Jeez… a bedroom. The cabin is cream and maple wood and the small double bed is covered in gold and taupe cushions. It looks… very comfortable.

Edward turns and pulls me into his arms, gazing down at me.

"I thought we'd spend our wedding night at 35,000 feet, Isabella. It's something I've never done."

Holy Cow… another first. I gape up at him, my heart pumping.

"But first I have to get you out of this dress."

***

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Edward shouts, waking me.

He’s standing at the end of my sun lounger, glaring down at me, all wet and beautiful. He’s mad. Shit… He’s really mad.

Chapter 89/2

I blink up at him, suddenly very awake after my sleep.

"No tan lines…" I whisper weakly in my defense.

His green eyes blaze. He reaches down, scoops up my bikini top from his sun lounger and tosses it at me.

"Put this on!" he hisses.

"Edward, no one is looking."

"Trust me. They're looking. I'm sure Taylor and the security crew are enjoying the show!" he snarls.

Holy Shit! Why do I keep forgetting about them? I grasp my breasts in panic, hiding them. Ever since Echo Charlie's sabotaged demise we are constantly shadowed by damned security.

"Yes!" Edward hisses. "Not forgetting some sleazy fucking pap could get a shot of you too. Do you want to be all over the National Enquirer again? Naked this time?"

Shit! The paps! Fuck! As I hurriedly scramble into my top, all fingers and thumbs, I can feel the color draining from my face. I shudder. The paparazzi… again. The unpleasant memory of being besieged outside SIP after our engagement was leaked comes unwelcome to my mind – all part of the Edward Cullen package.

"L'addition!" Edward snaps at the passing waitress. "We're going," he says to me.

"Now?"

"Yes. Now."

Oh… shit… he's not to be argued with.

He pulls on his shorts, even though his trunks are dripping wet, then his grey t-shirt. The waitress is back in a moment with his credit card and the check. Reluctantly I wriggle into my turquoise sundress and step into my flip-flops. Once the waitress has left Edward snatches up his book and masks his angry expression behind mirrored aviator specs. He's bristling with tension and anger. My heart sinks… Every other woman on the beach is topless – I just wanted to fit in. I look odd with my top *on*. I sigh inwardly, my spirits

sinking. I thought Edward would see the funny side… sort of… but his sense of humor seems to have evaporated.

"Please don't be mad at me," I whisper, taking his book and BlackBerry from him and placing them into my backpack.

"Too late for that," he says quietly – too quietly. "Come." Taking my hand he signals up to Taylor and his two sidekicks, the French security officers Philippe and Gaston. Weirdly, they are identical twins. They have been patiently watching us, and everyone else on the beach, from the verandah. Why do I keep forgetting about them? How? Taylor is stony-faced behind his dark glasses, though I am still not used to seeing him so casually dressed in shorts and black polo shirt.

Edward leads me back into the hotel, through the lobby and out onto the street. He remains silent, brooding, and bad-tempered, and it's all my fault. Taylor and his team shadow us.

"Where are we going?" I ask tentatively, gazing up at him.

"Back to the boat." He doesn't look at me.

I have no idea of the time… must be about five or six in the afternoon. When we reach the quayside Edward leads me onto the pontoon where the motorboat and jet ski belonging to the Fair Lady are moored. As Edward unties the jet ski, I hand my backpack to Taylor. I glance nervously up at him, but like Edward, his expression gives nothing away. I flush, thinking about what he's seen on the beach.

"Here you go, Mrs Cullen." Taylor passes me a life vest from the motorboat and I dutifully put it on. Why am I the only one who has to wear a life jacket? Edward and Taylor exchange some kind of look… jeez, is he angry with Taylor too? Edward then checks the straps on my life jacket, cinching the middle one tightly. "You'll do," he mutters sullenly, still not looking me in the eye. Shit.

He climbs gracefully on to the Jet Ski and holds out his hand for me to join him. Grasping it tightly I manage to throw my leg over the seat behind him without falling into the sea, while Taylor and the twins clamber into the motorboat. Edward kicks the jet ski away from the quay, and it floats gently into the marina.

"Hold on!" he orders, and I put my arms around him. This is my favorite part of traveling by jet ski. I hug him tightly, my nose nuzzling into his back… marvelling that there was a time when he would not have tolerated me touching him this way. He smells good… of Edward and the sea. *Forgive me, Edward, please?* I can feel him stiffen slightly.

"Steady," he says, his tone softer. I kiss his back and rest my cheek lightly against him, looking back towards the quay, where a few holidaymakers have gathered to watch the show.

Edward turns the key and the motor roars into life. With one twist of the accelerator the jet ski bucks forward and speeds across the cool dark water, through the marina and out to the center of the harbor towards the Fair Lady. I hold him tighter… I love this – it's so exciting. I can feel every muscle in Edward's lean frame as I press myself against him, clinging to him.

Taylor draws up alongside us in the motorboat. Edward glances at him, then accelerates again, and we shoot forward, skimming over the top of the water like an expertly tossed pebble. Taylor shakes his head in resigned exasperation and heads straight to the yacht, while Edward shoots past the Fair Lady, heading out towards the open sea.

The sea spray is splashing us, the warm wind buffeting my face and whipping. my ponytail crazily around me. This is so much *fun*. Maybe the thrill of this ride will dispel Edward's bad mood. I can't see his face, but I can tell he's enjoying himself – carefree, acting his age for a change.

He steers in a huge semi-circle and I can see the shoreline – the boats in the marina, the mosaic of yellow, white and sand colored offices and apartments, and the craggy mountains behind. It looks so disorganized – not the regimented blocks that I am used to – but so picturesque. Edward glances down at me, and I can see the ghost of a smile playing on his lips.

"Again?" he shouts over the noise of the engine.

I nod enthusiastically. His answering grin is dazzling, and he opens the throttle and speeds round the Fair Lady and on out to sea once more… and I think I'm forgiven.

-

"You've caught the sun," Edward says mildly as he undoes my life vest. I gaze up at him, anxiously trying to assess his mood. We are on deck aboard the yacht, and one of the stewards is standing quietly nearby, waiting for my life vest. Edward passes it to him.

"Will that be all sir?" the young man asks. I love his French accent.

Edward glances at me, takes off his shades, and slips them into the collar of his t-shirt, letting them hang.

"Would you like a drink?" he asks me.

"Do I need one?"

He cocks his head to one side.

"Why would you say that?" His voice is soft.

"You know why."

He gazes down at me as if weighing something up in his mind. *Oh, what is he thinking?*

"Two gin and tonics please. And some nuts and olives," he says to the steward, who nods and quickly vanishes.

"You think I'm going to punish you?" Edward's voice is silky.

"Do you want to?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"I'll think of something. Maybe when you've had your drink." And it's a sensual threat. I swallow. *Oh my…* My inner goddess blinks up from her sun lounger where she's trying to catch rays with a silver reflector fanned out at her neck.

Edward's brow furrows momentarily.

"You want to be?"

How does he know?

"Depends," I mutter, flushing.

"On what?" And I see that ghost of a smile on his lips.

"If you want to hurt me or not."

His mouth presses into a hard line, humor forgotten. He leans forward and kisses my forehead.

"Isabella, you're my wife, not my sub. I don't ever want to hurt you. You should know that by now. Just… just don't take your clothes off in public. I don't want you naked all over Star magazine. You don't want that, and I'm sure Charlie doesn't want that either."

Oh! Charlie. Holy shit, he'd have a coronary. What was I thinking? I mentally castigate myself…

The steward appears with our drinks and nibbles and places them on the teak table.

"Sit," Edward commands me softly. I do as I am bid, and settle into a director's chair. Edward takes a seat beside me and passes me a gin and tonic.

"Cheers, Mrs Cullen."

"Cheers, Mr Cullen."

I take a welcome sip. It's thirst-quenchingly cold and delicious. When I gaze at him he's watching me carefully, his mood unreadable. It's very frustrating… I don't know if he's still mad at me. I deploy my patented distraction technique.

"Who owns this boat?" I ask.

"A British knight. Sir Somebody-Or-Other. His great-grandfather started a grocery store. His daughter's married to one of the Crown Princes of Europe."

Oh…

"Super-rich?"

Edward looks suddenly wary.

"Yes."

"Like you," I murmur.

"Yes."

Oh…

"And like you," Edward whispers, and pops an olive into his mouth. I blink rapidly… a vision of him in his tux and silver waistcoat comes to mind… his green eyes burning with sincerity as he gazes down at me during our wedding ceremony.

"All that is mine is now yours…" he says, his voice ringing out clearly, reciting his vows from memory.

All mine? Holy crow.

"It's odd. Going from nothing, to…" I wave my hand to indicate our opulent surroundings. "To everything."

"You'll get used to it," he says reassuringly.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to it, Edward." I shudder as I recall the crazy shopping fest Edward demanded I go on with Caroline Acton – the personal shopper from Niemans – in preparation for this honeymoon. My bikini alone cost $540. I mean, it's nice, but really – that's a ridiculous amount of money for four triangular scraps of material.

"You will," he says and grins at me.

Oh Fifty… maybe with time. I push the small dish of salted almonds and cashews towards him.

"Your nuts, sir," I say with as straight a face as I can manage.

He smirks at me.

"Why thank you, Mrs Cullen. I don't mind if I do." He takes an almond. "I am nuts about you," he says, his eyes shining wickedly, sparkling with humor as he enjoys my little joke. He licks his lips.

"Drink up. We're going to bed."

What?

Drink, he mouths at me, his eyes darkening. Holy cow… the look he gives me could be solely responsible for global warming. I pick up my gin and drain the glass, not taking my eyes off him. His mouth drops open slightly… I can see the tip of his tongue between his teeth, and he smiles… lewdly at me. In one fluid move, he gets up and bends over me, resting his hands on the arms of my chair.

"I'm going to make an example of you. Come. No peeing," he whispers in my ear.

I gasp. *No peeing?* My subconscious looks up from her book – the collected works of Charles Dickens, Vol. 1 – with alarm.

"It's not what you think," Edward smirks, holding his hand out to me. "Trust me." He looks so sexy and sincere. How can I resist?

"Okay…" I place my hand in his, because quite simply, I'd trust him with my life. Jeez – what has he got planned? My heart starts pounding in anticipation.

He leads me across the deck and through the doors into the plush, beautifully appointed main salon, along a narrow corridor, through the dining room, and down the stairs to the main master cabin. Our room.

The cabin has been cleaned since this morning and the bed made. It's a lovely room. With two portholes on both the starboard and port sides, it's elegantly decorated in dark walnut furniture, with cream walls and soft furnishings in gold and red.

Edward releases my hand. Taking his sunglasses from the collar of his t-shirt, he places them on his bedside, then pulls his t-shirt off over his head and tosses it onto a chair. He steps out of this flip-flops and removes his shorts and trunks in one graceful move, so that he's naked. *Oh My… Will I ever tire of looking at him naked?*He is utterly glorious, and all mine. His skin glows… he's caught the sun too, and his hair is longer, flopping over his forehead. I am one lucky, lucky girl.

He reaches forward and grasps my chin, pulling slightly so that I stop biting my lip. He runs his thumb along my released lower lip.

"That's better," he whispers. He turns and heads over to the impressive armoire that houses his clothes. From the bottom drawer he produces two pairs of metal handcuffs and an airline mask. *Handcuffs!* We've never used handcuffs. I glance quickly and nervously at the bed. Where the hell is he going to attach those? He turns and gazes steadily at me, his eyes dark and luminous.

"These can be quite painful. They can bite into the skin if you pull too hard." He holds up one pair. "But I really want to use them on you now."

Holy fuck… my mouth goes dry.

"Here." He stalks gracefully forward and hands me a set. "Do you want to try them first?"

They feel solid, the metal cold. Vaguely I hope I never have to wear a pair of these for real.

Edward is watching me intently.

"Where are the keys?" I whisper. He holds out his palm, and in it there's a small metallic key.

"This does both sets. In fact, all sets," he says softly. How many sets does he have? I don't remember seeing any in the museum chest. Reaching up he strokes my cheek with his index finger, trailing it down to my mouth. He leans in, as if to kiss me.

"Do you want to play?" he whispers, and everything in my body heads south, as desire floods and tightens deep in my belly.

"Yes," I whisper.

He smiles.

"Good." He runs his nose up along mine and plants feather-light kisses along my brow. "We're going to need a safe word," he breathes.

What?

"Stop won't be enough, because you will probably say that, but you won't mean it." He runs his nose back down mine… the only contact between us. *Oh my.*

What does he mean? I can hear my heart pounding in my ears. Shit… how can he do this with just words…?

"This is not going to hurt. It will be intense. Very intense, because I am not going to let you move. Okay?"

Oh my. This sounds so… hot. I can hear my breathing – fuck, I am panting already. My inner goddess has her sequins on and is warming up to dance the Rumba. Thank heavens I'm married to this man, otherwise this would be embarrassing. My eyes flick down to his arousal. Holy Crow!

"Okay…" My voice is barely a whisper.

"Choose a word, Bella."

Oh…

"A safe word," he says softly.

"Popsicle…"

"Popsicle?" I can hear the amusement in Edward's voice.

"Yes."

He grins as he leans back to gaze down at me.

"Interesting choice. Lift up your arms."

I do as I'm told, and Edward grasps the hem of my sundress, lifts it over my head and tosses it on the floor. He holds out his hand, and I give him back the handcuffs. He places

both sets on the bedside table along with the blindfold, and yanks the quilt off the bed, letting it fall to the floor.

"Turn round."

I turn, and he undoes my bikini top, so that it falls to the floor.

"Tomorrow, I will staple this to you," he mutters and reaches up, tugging at my hair tie, freeing my hair. He gathers it into one hand and yanks gently so I step back against him… against his chest… against his erection. I gasp as he pulls my head to one side and kisses my neck.

"You're very disobedient," he whispers in my ear, sending delicious shivers through me.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Hmmm…. what are we going to do about that?"

"Learn to live with it…" I breathe. Holy Crow, his soft languid kisses are driving me wild. He grins against my neck.

"Ah, Mrs Cullen. You are ever the optimist."

He straightens. Taking my hair he carefully parts it into three strands, braids it slowly, then fastens my hair tie to the end. He tugs my braid gently and leans down to my ear.

"I am going to teach you a lesson," he murmurs – then moves suddenly, grabbing me by the waist, sitting down on the bed, twisting me round and yanking me across his knee, so that I can feel his erection at my belly. He smacks my backside once, hard. I yelp, then I'm on my back on the bed, and he's gazing down at me, his eyes molten green. I am going to combust.

"Do you know how beautiful you are?" he whispers, trailing his fingertips up my thigh so that I tingle… everywhere. Getting up from the bed, without taking his eyes off me, he gathers both sets of handcuffs, reaches down, grasps my left leg and snaps one cuff around my ankle.

Oh!

Lifting my right leg he repeats the process, so I have a pair of handcuffs attached to each ankle. I still have no idea where he's going to attach them.

"Sit up," he orders softly and I do as I'm bid.

"Now hug your knees."

I blink at him, then draw my legs up so they are bent in front of me, and wrap my arms around them. He reaches down, lifts my chin, and plants a soft wet kiss on my lips… then slips the blindfold over my eyes. I can see nothing… all I can hear is my rapid breathing, and the sound of the water lapping against the sides of the yacht as she sways gently on the sea.

Oh my… What is he going to do? I am so aroused… already.

"What's the safe word, Isabella?" he murmurs.

"Popsicle," I breathe.

"Good," he says, and taking my left hand he snaps a cuff around my wrist, then repeats the process with my right. My left hand is tied to my left ankle, my right hand to the right leg. I cannot straighten my legs. Holy Fuck…

"Now," Edward breathes. "I'm going to fuck you till you scream."

What? I gasp as all the air leaves my body. He grasps both of my heels and tips me back so that I fall backwards on to the bed. I have no choice but to keep my legs bent. The cuffs tighten slightly as I pull against them. He's right… they are only just not painful. This feels so weird – being trussed up and helpless. He pulls my ankles apart, and I groan.

He kisses my inner thigh, and I want to squirm beneath him, but I can't. I have no purchase to move my hips… my feet are suspended. I cannot move. *Holy Crow.*

"You're going to have to absorb all the pleasure, Isabella. No moving," he murmurs, as he crawls up my body, kissing me along the edge of my bikini bottoms. He pulls the strings on each side, and the scraps of material fall away. I'm now naked, at his mercy. He kisses my belly, dipping his tongue into my navel, nipping me with his teeth.

"Ah…" I sigh. This is going to be tough… I had no idea. He traces soft sucky kisses and bites up to my breasts.

"Shhh…" he soothes. "You are so beautiful, Bella."

I groan, frustrated. Normally I'd be grinding my hips, responding to his touch with a rhythm of my own. But I cannot move. I moan, pulling on my restraints. The metal bites into my skin.

"Argh!" I whimper softly. But I really don't care.

"You drive me crazy," he whispers. "So I am going to drive you crazy." He's resting on me now, his weight on his elbows, and he turns his attention to my breasts. Biting, sucking, rolling my nipples between his fingers and thumbs, driving me wild. He doesn't stop. I can feel his erection pushing against me.

"Please," I whisper.

I can feel his triumphant smile against my skin.

"Shall I make you come this way?" he breathes against my nipple so that it hardens some more. "You know I can." He suckles me hard and I cry out, pleasure lancing from my chest directly to my groin. I pull helplessly on the cuffs, swamped by the sensation.

"Yes," I breathe desperately.

"Oh baby… that would be too easy," he murmurs.

"Oh – please…"

"Shhh." His teeth scrape my chin as he trails soft kisses to my mouth, and I gasp. He kisses me. His skilled tongue invading my mouth, tasting, exploring, dominating, but my tongue meets his challenge, writhing against his. He tastes of cool gin and Edward Cullen and he smells of the sea… oh my. He grasps my chin, holding my head in place.

"Still, baby. I want you still," he whispers against my mouth.

"I want to see you," I pant.

"Oh no, Bella. You'll feel more this way." And agonizingly slowly he flexes his hips and pushes himself part way into me. I would normally tilt my pelvis up to meet him… but I can't move. He withdraws.

"Ah! Edward, please!" I gasp.

"Again?" he teases, his voice hoarse.

"Edward!" I shout.

He pushes fractionally into me again, then withdraws while kissing me, his fingers tugging at my nipple. It's pleasure overload.

"No!" I cry.

"Do you want me, Isabella?" he whispers.

"Yes," I beg.

"Tell me," he murmurs, his breathing harsh, and he teases me once more – in… and out.

"I want you," I whimper. "Please."

I hear his soft sigh against my ear.

"And have me you will, Isabella."

He rears up and slams into me. I scream, tilting my head back, pulling on the restraints as he hits my sweet spot, and I am all sensation, everywhere…. a sweet, sweet agony, and I cannot move. He stills, then circles his hips, and the motion radiates deep inside me.

"Why do you defy me, Bella?"

"Edward, stop…"

He circles deep inside me again, ignoring my plea, easing out slowly and then slamming into me again.

"Tell me. Why?" he hisses, and I'm vaguely aware that it's through gritted teeth.

"Arrgh!" I cry out in an incoherent wail… this is too much.

"Tell me."

"Edward…"

"Bella, I need to know."

He slams into me again, thrusting so deep, and I can feel myself building, and the feeling is so intense – it swamps me, spiraling out from deep within my belly, to each limb, to each biting metal restraint.

"I don't know!" I cry out. "Because I can! Because I love you! Please, Edward…"

He groans loudly and thrusts deep, again and again, over and over, and I am lost, trying to absorb the pleasure. It's mind blowing…. body blowing… I long to straighten my legs, to control my imminent orgasm, but I can't… I am helpless. I'm his, just his, to do as he wills… Tears spring to my eyes. This is so intense. I can't stop him. I don't want to stop him… I want… I want… oh no, oh no… this is too…

"That's it," Edward growls. "Feel it, baby!"

I detonate around him… again and again, round and round… screaming loudly as my orgasm rips me apart, scorching through me like wild fire, consuming everything, consuming me so I am wrung ragged, tears streaming down my face… my body left pulsing and shaking.

And I'm aware that Edward kneels, still inside me, pulling me upright onto his lap… he clutches my head with one hand and my back with another, and he comes… violently, inside me… while my insides continue to pulse and quake with after-shocks. It's draining, it's exhausting, it's hell… it's heaven. It's hedonism gone wild.

Edwards tears off the blindfold and kisses me. He kisses my eyes, my nose, my cheeks. He kisses away the tears, clutching my face in between his hands.

"I love you, Mrs Cullen," he breathes. "Even thought you make me so mad – I feel so alive with you." I don't have the energy to open either my eyes or my mouth to respond. Very gently he lays me back on the bed and eases out of me.

"Ah!" I mouth some wordless protest. He gets off the bed and undoes the handcuffs. When I am free he gently rubs my wrists and ankles, then lies down beside me again, pulling me into his arms. I stretch out my legs… oh my, that feels good… I feel good. Holy shit… that was, without doubt, the most intense climax I have ever endured. Hmmm… an Edward Cullen, fifty shades punishment fuck.

I really must misbehave more often…

-

A pressing need from my bladder wakes me. When I open my eyes I am disorientated. *Where am I?* London? Paris? Oh – the boat. I can feel her pitch and roll, and hear the hum of the engines. We're on the move… How odd. Edward is beside me, working on his laptop, casually dressed in a white linen shirt and chino trousers, his feet bare. His hair is still wet, I presume from a shower. I can smell his body wash, and his Edward smell… *Hmmm.*

"Hi," he murmurs, gazing down at me, his eyes warm.

"Hi," I smile, feeling suddenly shy. "We're moving?"

"I figured since we ate out last night, and went to the ballet and the Casino, that we'd dine on board tonight. A quiet night à deux."

I grin at him.

"Where are we going?"

"Cannes."

"Okay." I stretch, feeling stiff. No amount of training with Laurent could have prepared me for this afternoon. I rise gingerly, needing the bathroom. Grabbing my silk robe I hastily put it on. Why do I feel so shy? I can feel Edward's eyes on me… when I glance at him he returns to his laptop, his brow furrowed. Why's he frowning?

As I absentmindedly wash my hands at the vanity unit, recalling last night at the Casino, my robe falls open. I stare at myself in the mirror, shocked.

Holy Fuck! What has he done to me?

Chapter 90/3

I gaze in horror at the red marks all over my breasts. *Hickeys!* I have hickeys… I am married to one of the most respected businessmen in the U.S. and he's given me goddamn hickeys. How did I not feel him doing this to me? I flush… fact is I know exactly why – Mr Orgasmic was using his fine-motor sexing skills on me. My subconscious peers over her half moon specs and tuts disapprovingly, while my inner goddess slumbers on her chaise longue, out for the count. I gape at my reflection. My wrists have a red welt around them from the handcuffs. No doubt they'll bruise… I examine my ankles – more welts. Holy hell, I look like I've been in some sort of accident. I gaze at myself, trying to absorb how I look. My body is so different these days. It's changed subtly since I've known him… I've become leaner and fitter, and my hair is glossy and well cut. My nails are manicured, my feet pedicured, my eyebrows threaded and beautifully shaped. For the first time in my life I'm well groomed – except for these hideous love bites. And of course, I no longer have pubic hair… I flush at that memory.

~oOo~

"This is the only meeting I have scheduled the entire time we're on our honeymoon," Edward coos apologetically into my ear. I grumble, not wanting to be woken. We are in the Hellenic suite in Browns Hotel, in the heart of London, and I'm exhausted. I have spent three days walking around old buildings, art galleries and museums, and three nights entertaining and being thoroughly entertained by my priapic husband.

Edward nuzzles my ear. He smells of fresh body wash and clean linen and Edward. My favorite scent in the whole wide world.

"I shouldn't be more than three hours."

"Hmmm."

"Don't forget to order breakfast."

"Hmmm."

"If you go out, take Taylor with you."

"Hmmm."

"No kiss for your husband, Mrs Cullen?"

"No rest for the wicked, Mr Cullen?" I groan sleepily, reluctantly opening my eyes.

"I like you wicked," he whispers. I can hear the smile in his voice and it makes me smile. Nothing makes me happier than making Edward smile. I turn over to face him as he sits on the side of the bed. He gazes down at me, his green eyes soft and warm. He's freshly shaved, wearing a crisp white shirt and a dark navy suit, no tie. He looks edible. Leaning down he runs his nose along mine and plants a soft kiss on my lips.

"Laters, baby," he murmurs. "Now go back to sleep." Rising he heads out of the bedroom and I hear the click as the door to the suite shuts behind him. Back to sleep? I'm awake now. I pout at the high ceiling. Three hours on my own – what am I to do?

In the shower I wash my hair, contemplating my empty morning. Edward's been gone fifteen minutes and I miss him already. These first few days of our honeymoon have been bliss, in spite of the all the sight-seeing. He's been attentive, funny, knowledgeable… sexy… Edward. We've come so far in the last few months. His rules spring unbidden to my mind as I rinse my hair. Mentally I tick them off: eight hours' sleep… well, he never lets me sleep that long. The food list – I roll my eyes at the memory. So glad I fought that. The clothes… yes, he won on that, I suppose. I now have a wardrobe to rival Rose's.

I start shaving my legs. The exercise… Laurent is great fun – a complete an utter tyrant, but very good at his job. Between him and Edward I have never felt so fit. The waxing – hmmm. Perhaps that's what Edward likes – no hair, anywhere. I stare at my razor. Well… here goes nothing.

~oOo~

I don't want to think about Edward's reaction to me shaving myself at the moment. I am too mad. How dare he mark me like this, like some teenager? In all the time we've been together, he's never given me hickeys. I look like hell. I know why he's done this. Damn control freak. Right! My subconscious folds her arms beneath her small bosom – he's gone too far this time. I stalk out of the ensuite and into the walk-in closet opposite the bathroom, carefully avoiding even a glance in his direction. Slipping out of my robe I pull on my sweatpants and a camisole. I undo the braid, and picking up a hairbrush from the small vanity unit, brush out my tangles.

"Isabella," Edward calls. I can hear his anxiety. "Are you okay?"

I ignore him. Am I okay? No, I am not okay. After what he's done to me I doubt I'll be able to wear a swimsuit, let alone one of my ridiculously expensive bikinis, for the rest of our honeymoon. The thought is suddenly so infuriating. How *dare* he? I'll give him are-you-okay, I seethe, as fury spikes through me. I can behave like an adolescent too! Stepping back into the bedroom I hurl the hairbrush at him, turn and leave – though not before I've seen his shocked expression and his lightning reaction, lifting his arms to protect his head so that the brush bounces ineffectively off his forearm and onto to the bed.

I storm out of our cabin, head upstairs and out on deck, stomping towards the bow. I need some space to try and calm down. It's dark and the air is balmy. The warm breeze carries the smell of the Mediterranean and the scent of jasmine and bougainvillea from the shore. The Fair Lady glides effortlessly through the calm cobalt sea as I rest my elbows on the wooden railing, gazing at the distant shore where tiny lights wink and twinkle. I take a deep healing breath and slowly begin to calm. I'm aware of him behind me before I hear him.

"You're mad at me," he whispers.

"You noticed!" I snap.

"How mad?"

"Scale of one to ten, I think I'm at fifty. Apt, huh?"

"That mad." He sounds surprised and impressed at once.

"Yes. Pushed to violence mad," I say through my gritted teeth.

He stays silent as I turn and scowl at him, watching me with wide unreadable eyes. Except I know from that expression that he's out of his depth. He makes no move to touch me.

"Edward, you have to stop unilaterally trying to bring me to heel. You made your point on the beach. Very effectively, as I recall."

He shrugs minutely.

"Well, you won't take your top off again," he murmurs petulantly.

What? And this justifies what he's done to me? I glare at him.

"I don't like you leaving marks on me. Well, not this many anyway! Hard limit." I spit at him.

"I don't like you taking your clothes off in public. That's a hard limit for me," he growls.

"I think we've established that," I hiss through my teeth. "Look at me!" I pull down my camisole to reveal the top of my breasts. Edward gazes at me, his eyes not leaving my face. His expression is so wary and uncertain. He's not used to seeing me this mad. Can't he see what he's done? Can't he see how ridiculous he is? I want to shout at him, but I refrain – I don't want to push him too far. Heaven knows what he'd do. Eventually he blinks and holds his palms up in a resigned, conciliatory gesture.

"Okay," he says his voice placating. "I get it."

Alleluia!

"Good!" I snap.

He runs his hand through his hair.

"I'm sorry. Please don't be mad at me," he breathes. Finally he looks contrite – using my own words back at me.

"You are so adolescent at times," I mutter mulishly, but the fight has gone out of my voice, and he knows it. He steps closer and tentatively raises his hand to tuck my hair behind my ear.

"I know," he acknowledges softly. "I have a lot to learn."

Dr Banner's words come back to me… *Emotionally, Edward is an adolescent, Bella. He bypassed that phase in his life totally. He's channeled all his energies into succeeding in the business world, and he has, beyond all expectations. His emotional world has to play catch-up.*

My heart thaws slightly.

"We both do," I sigh, and cautiously raising my hand, place it over his heart. He doesn't flinch like he used to, but I feel him stiffen slightly. He puts his hand over mine and smiles his shy smile.

"I've just learnt that you've a good arm and a good aim, Mrs Cullen. I would never have figured that, but then I constantly underestimate you. You always surprise me," he murmurs. I arch my eyebrow at him.

"Target practice with my father. I can throw and shoot straight, Mr Cullen and you'd do well to remember that."

"I will endeavor to do that Mrs Cullen, or ensure that all potential projectile objects are nailed down and that you don't have access to a gun." He smirks at me.

I smirk back at him, narrowing my eyes.

"I am resourceful," I whisper.

"That you are," he whispers back, and releases my hand, circling his arms around me. Pulling me into an embrace he buries his nose in my hair. I wrap my arms around him, holding him close, and feel the tension leave his body as he nuzzles me.

"Am I forgiven?" he whispers.

"Am I?"

I feel his smile.

"Yes," he answers.

"Ditto."

We stand holding each other, my pique forgotten. He does smell good, adolescent or not. How can I resist him?

"Hungry?" he says after a while. I have my eyes closed and my head against his chest.

"Yes. Famished. All the … err… activity has given me an appetite." I raise my head to gaze up into his green eyes. "But I'm not dressed for dinner." I'm sure my sweatpants and camisole would be frowned upon in the dining room.

"You look good to me, Isabella. Besides, it's our boat for the week, we can dress how we like. Think of it as dress down Tuesday on the Cote D'Azur. Anyway, I thought we'd eat on deck."

"Yes, I'd like that."

He leans down and kisses me, an earnest, forgive-me kiss then we wander hand in hand towards the bow where our gazpacho soup awaits.

~o~

The steward serves our crème brulée and discreetly retires.

"Why do you always braid my hair?" I ask Edward out of curiosity. We're sitting at right angles to each other at the table, my lower leg curled around his. He pauses as he's about to pick up his dessertspoon, and frowns slightly.

"I don't want your hair catching in anything," he says quietly, and for a moment he's lost in thought. "Habit, I think," he adds, and shrugs. He frowns again, more deeply this time, and his eyes dart immediately to mine, his pupils dilating suddenly with alarm.

Holy shit – what's he remembered? It's something painful, some early childhood memory, I guess. I don't want to remind him of that! Leaning over I put my index finger over his lips.

"No, it doesn't matter. I don't need to know. I was just curious," I murmur, and give him a warm reassuring smile. His look is wary, but after a moment he visibly relaxes, his relief evident. I lean over to kiss the corner of his mouth.

"I love you," I murmur, and he smiles his heart-achingly shy smile, and I melt.

"I will always love you, Edward."

"And I you…" he says softly.

"In spite of my disobedience?" I raise my eyebrow.

"Because of your disobedience, Isabella." He grins at me.

I crack my spoon through the burnt sugar crust of my dessert, and shake my head. Will I ever understand this man? Hmm – this crème brulée is delicious.

~o~

"What's with the no-peeing thing?" I ask, once the steward has cleared our dessert plates and is out of earshot. Edward reaches for the bottle of rosé and refills my glass.

"You really want to know?" he half smiles at me, his eyes alight with a salacious gleam.

"Do I?" I gaze at him through my lashes as I take a sip of my wine.

"The fuller your bladder, the more intense your orgasm, Bella."

I flush.

"Oh. I see." Holy cow, that explains a lot.

He grins at me, looking far too knowing. Will I always be on the back foot with Mr Sexpertise?

"Yes. Well…" I desperately hunt around for a change of subject. He takes pity on me.

"What do you want to do for the rest of the evening?" He cocks his head to one side and gives me his lopsided grin. *Whatever you want, Edward. Put your theory to the test again?* I shrug.

"I know," he murmurs. Grabbing his glass of wine, he rises and holds his hand out to me. "Come," he says. I take it, and he leads me into the main salon.

His iPod is in the speaker dock on the bureau. He switches it on and selects a song.

"Dance with me." He pulls me into his arms.

"If you insist."

"I insist, Mrs Cullen."

Dancing with Edward makes me believe I can dance. A slinky, cheesy melody starts. What's this? A Latin rhythm… Edward grins down at me and starts to move, sweeping me off my feet, taking me with him round the salon.

You'll never find

As long as you live

Someone who loves you, tender like I do

And you'll never find, no matter where you search

Someone who cares about you the way I do

A man with a voice like warm melted caramel croons. Edward dips me low, and I yelp in surprise and giggle. He smiles down at me, his eyes filled with humor, then scoops me up and spins me under his arm.

"You dance so well," I whisper. "It's like I can dance."

He gives me a Sphinx-like smile but says nothing, and I wonder if it's because he's thinking of her… Mrs Robinson, the woman who taught him how to dance – and how to fuck. She hasn't crossed my mind for a while. Edward has not mentioned her since his birthday, and as far as I'm aware their business relationship is over. Reluctantly though, I have to admit – she's some teacher.

You'll never find – it'll take the end of all time

Someone to understand you like I do

No I'm not trying to make you stay babe

Cos I'm the one who loves you

And there is no one else

He dips me low again and plants a swift kiss on my lips.

You're gonna miss my love

You're gonna miss my love

Miss my love

"I'd miss your love," I murmur.

"I'd more than miss your love," he says, and spins me once more.

You'll never find – another love like mine

Someone who needs you like I do

Edward sings the words softly in my ear.

But I'm the one who loves you

And there is no one else

No – there's just no one else

You're gonna miss my love

I'm gonna miss your love

The track ends and Edward gazes down at me, his eyes dark and luminous, all humor gone, and I'm suddenly breathless.

"Come to bed with me," he breathes.

Edward, you had me at 'I do' – two and half weeks ago. But I know this is his way of apologizing, and making sure all is well between us after our spat.

~o~

When I wake the sun shining through the portholes and the water reflects shimmering patterns onto the cabin ceiling. Edward is nowhere to be seen. I stretch out and smile. Hmmm… I'll take a punishment fuck followed by make-up sex any day. I marvel what it is to go to bed with two different men – angry Edward and sweet let-me-make-it-

up-to-you-in-any-way-I-can Edward. It's tricky to decide which of them I like the best. I rise and head for the bathroom. Opening the door I find Edward inside shaving, naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist. He turns and beams at me, not fazed that I am interrupting him. I have discovered that Edward will never lock the door if he is the only person in the room… the reason why is sobering, and not one I want to dwell on.

"Good morning, Mrs Cullen," he says brightly, radiating his good mood.

"Good morning yourself," I grin back at him as I watch him shave. I love watching him shave. He pulls up his chin and shaves beneath, taking long deliberate strokes, and I find myself unconsciously mirroring his actions. Pulling my upper lip down just as he does, to shave his filtrum. He turns and smirks at me, one half of his face still covered in shaving soap.

"Enjoying the show?" he asks.

Oh Edward, I could watch you for hours.

"One of my all-time favorites," I murmur, and he leans down and kisses me quickly, smearing shaving soap on my face.

"Shall I do this to you again?" he whispers wickedly, and holds up the razor.

I flush and purse my lips at him.

"No," I mutter, pretending to sulk. "I'll wax next time."

~oOo~

"What the hell have you done?" Edward exclaims. He cannot keep his horrified amusement to himself. He sits up in bed in our suite at Browns Hotel, switches on the bedside light and gazes down at me, his mouth a startled 'o'. It must be midnight. I blush the color of the sheets in the playroom, and try to pull down my satin nightdress so he can't see. He grabs my hand to stop me.

"Bella!"

"I – err… shaved," I squeak.

"I can see that! Why?" He's grinning from ear to ear. I cover my face with my hands. Why am I so embarrassed?

"Hey," he says softly, and pulls my hand away. "Don't hide." He's biting his lip so that he won't laugh. "Tell me. Why?" His eyes dance with merriment. Why does he find this so funny?

"Stop laughing at me."

"I'm not laughing at you. I'm sorry. I'm… delighted," he says.

"Oh…"

"Tell me. Why?"

I take a deep breath.

"This morning, after you left for your meeting, I took a shower, and was remembering all your rules."

He blinks. The humor in his expression has vanished and he regards me cautiously. His brow furrows, but he doesn't interrupt me.

"And I was ticking them off one by one, and how I felt about them, and I remembered the beauty salon, and I thought… this is what you'd like. I wasn't brave enough to go and wax." My voice disappears into a whisper.

He stares at me, his green eyes glowing – this time not with mirth at my folly, but with love.

"Oh Bella," he breathes. He leans down and kisses me tenderly. "You beguile me," he whispers against my lips, and kisses me once more, clasping my face in both his hands. "I have never been so happy."

"Because I shaved?" I gasp.

"No! Because you're here with me and you're mine."

Oh… Edward. I wrap my arms around him and kiss him back.

After a breathless moment he pulls back and leans up on one elbow. The humor is back.

"I think I should do a thorough inspection of your handiwork, Mrs Cullen."

"What? No." *He has to be kidding!* I cover myself, protecting the very recently deforested area.

"Oh no you don't, Isabella." He grasps my hands and prises them away, moving nimbly so he's between my legs, pinning my hands to my sides. He gives me a burning look that could light dry tinder, but before I combust he bends and skims his lips down my naked belly directly to my sex. I squirm beneath him, reluctantly resigned to my fate.

"Well, what have we here?" Edward plants a kiss where, until this morning, I had pubic hair – then scrapes his bristly chin across me.

"Ah!" I exclaim. Wow… that's sensitive.

Edward's eyes dart to mine, full of salacious longing.

"I think you missed a bit," he mutters and tugs gently, right underneath.

"Oh… Damn," I mutter, hoping this will put an end to his frankly intrusive scrutiny.

"I have an idea." He leaps naked out of bed and heads to the bathroom.

What on earth is he doing? He returns moments later, carrying a glass of water, a mug, my razor, his shaving brush, soap and a towel. He puts the water, brush, soap and razor on the bedside table and gazes down at me, holding the towel.

Oh no! My subconscious slams down her collected works of Charles Dickens, leaps up from her armchair and puts her hands on her hips.

"No. No. No," I squeak.

"Mrs Cullen, if a job's worth doing, it's worth doing well. Lift your hips." His eyes glow, fresh forest green. Holy Cow.

"Edward – you are not shaving me."

He cocks his head to one side.

"Whyever not?" he asks softly.

I flush… isn't it obvious?

"Because… It's just too…" I stutter.

"Intimate?" he whispers. "Bella, I've removed your tampon – don't get all squeamish on me now. Besides, I know this part of your body better than you do."

I gape at him – of all the arrogant… true, he does – but still.

"It's just wrong! It's… humiliating." My voice is prissy and whiney.

"I don't want to humiliate you, Bella. That's the last thing I want to do. This isn't wrong – this is hot," he breathes.

Hot? Really?

"This turns you on?" I can't keep the astonishment out of my voice.

He snorts.

"Can't you tell?"

I blush scarlet at the evidence of his arousal.

"Please," he whispers. "I want to."

Oh, what the hell. I lie back, throwing my arm over my face so I don't have to watch.

"Edward, you are so kinky," I mutter, as I lift my hips and he slips the towel beneath me. He kisses my inner thigh.

"Oh baby, how right you are."

I hear rather than see the slosh of water as he dips the shaving brush in the glass of water, then the soft swirl of the brush in the mug. The bed dips slightly as he kneels down and, grasping my left ankle, parts my legs.

"I'd really like to tie you up right now," he murmurs.

"Don't push your luck. I promise to keep still."

"Good."

I gasp as he runs the lathered brush between my legs to the apex of my thighs. It's warm. The water in the glass must be hot. I squirm a little. It tickles… but in a good way.

"Keep still," Edward admonishes and applies the brush again. "Or I *will* tie you down," he adds darkly, and a delicious shiver runs down my spine.

"Have you done this before?" I ask tentatively when he reaches for the razor.

"No."

"Oh. Good." I grin.

"Another first, Mrs Cullen."

"Hmmm. I like firsts."

"Me too. Here goes."

And with a gentleness that surprises me, he runs the razor over my sensitive flesh.

"Keep still," he breathes distractedly and I know he's concentrating hard.

It only takes a matter of minutes before he grabs the towel and wipes all the excess lather off me.

"There – that's more like it," he muses, and I finally lift my arm to look at him as he sits back to admire his handiwork.

"Happy?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

"Very." He grins wickedly and slowly eases a finger inside me.

I groan.

~oOo~

"But that was fun," he says his eyes gently mocking.

"For you. Not me."

"I seem to recall the aftermath was very satisfying." Edward returns to finishing his shave. I glance quickly down at my fingers. Yes – it was. I had no idea that the absence of pubic hair could make such a difference.

"Hey, I'm just teasing. Isn't that what husbands who are hopelessly in love with their wives meant to do?" Edward tips my chin up and gazes at me, his eyes suddenly filled with apprehension as he endeavors to read my expression.

Hmmm… payback time.

"Sit," I mutter.

He blinks at me, not understanding. I push him gently towards the lone white stool in the bathroom. He sits down, gazing at me with a puzzled expression, and I take the razor from him.

"Bella…" he warns as he realizes my intention. I lean down and kiss him.

"Head back," I whisper.

He hesitates.

"Tit for tat, Mr Cullen."

He stares at me with wary, amused disbelief.

"You know what you're doing?" he asks, his voice low.

I shake my head slowly, deliberately, trying to look as serious as possible. He closes his eyes and shakes his head minutely then tilts his head back in surrender.

Holy shit, he's going to let me shave him. My inner goddess flexes and stretches her arms outwards, her fingers interlocked, palms out, limbering up. Tentatively I slide my hand into the damp hair at his forehead, gripping tightly to hold him still. He clenches his eyes closed and his lips part as he inhales. Very gently I stroke his razor up from his neck to his chin, revealing a path of skin beneath the lather. Edward exhales.

"Did you think I was going to hurt you?"

"I never know what you're going to do Bella, but no – not intentionally."

I run the razor up his neck again, clearing a wider path in the lather.

"I would never intentionally hurt you, Edward."

He opens his eyes and circles his arms around me as I gently drag the razor down his cheek from the bottom of his sideburn.

"I know," he breathes, angling his face so I can shave the rest of his cheek. Two more strokes and I've finished.

"All done, and not a drop of blood spilt." I grin proudly.

He runs his hand up my leg so that my nightdress rides up my thigh, and pulls me on to his lap so that I'm astride him. I steady myself with my hands on his upper arms. He's really very muscular. He rubs his nose along mine.

"Can I take you somewhere today?"

"No sunbathing?" I arch a caustic brow at him.

He licks his lips nervously.

"No. No sunbathing today. I thought you might prefer that."

"Well since you've covered me in hickeys and effectively put the kibosh on that, sure, why not?"

Wisely he chooses to ignore my tone.

"It's a drive, but it's worth a visit from what I've read. A little village called Saint Paul de Vence. There are some galleries there. I thought we could pick out some paintings or sculptures for the new house, if we find anything we like."

Holy crap. I lean back and gaze at him. Art… he wants to buy art. How can I buy art?

"What?" he asks.

"I know nothing about art, Edward."

He shrugs and smiles at me indulgently.

"We'll only buy what we like. This isn't about investment."

Investment? Jeez.

"What?" he says again.

I shake my head.

"Look, I know we only got the architect's drawings the other day – but there's no harm in looking, and the town is an ancient, medieval place."

Oh – the architect, he had to remind me of her… a good friend of Emmett's, Tanya Denali. During our meetings she's been all over Edward like a rash.

"What now?" Edward exclaims. I shake my head.

"Tell me," he urges.

How can I tell him that I don't like Tanya? My dislike is irrational.

"You're not still mad about what I did yesterday?" He sighs and nuzzles his face between my breasts.

"No. I'm hungry," I mutter, knowing full well that this will distract him from this line of questioning.

"Why didn't you say?" He eases me off his lap and stands.

~o~

Saint Paul de Vence is a medieval fortified hilltop village, one of the most picturesque places I have ever seen. I stroll arm in arm with Edward through the narrow cobbled streets, my hand in the back pocket of his shorts. Taylor and either Gaston or Philippe – I can't tell the difference between them – trail behind us. We pass a tree-covered square where three old men, one wearing a traditional beret in spite of the heat, are playing boules. It's quite crowded with tourists, but I feel comfortable tucked under Edward's arm. There is so much to see: little alleys and passageways leading to courtyards with intricate stone fountains, ancient and modern sculptures, and fascinating little boutiques and shops.

In the first gallery Edward gazes distractedly at the erotic photographs in front of us, sucking gently on the arm of his aviator specs. They are the work of Florence D'elle – naked women in various poses.

"Not quite what I had in mind," I mumble disapprovingly. They make me think of the box of photographs I found in his closet… our closet. I wonder if he ever did destroy them.

"Me neither," Edward says, grinning down at me, and taking my hand to lead me to the next display. Idly I wonder if I should let him take photos of me after all. My inner goddess nods frantically with approval.

The next display is by a female painter who specializes in figurative art – fruit and vegetables in super close-up and rich glorious color.

"I like those," I point to three paintings of peppers. "They remind me of you chopping vegetables in my apartment," I giggle.

Edward's mouth twists as he tries, and fails, to hide his amusement.

"I thought I managed that quite competently," he mutters petulantly. "I was just a bit slow, and anyway," he pulls me into an embrace, "You were distracting me. Where would you put them?"

"What…?" Edward is nuzzling my ear.

"The paintings – where would you put them?" He bites my ear lobe and I feel it in my groin.

"Kitchen," I murmur.

"Hmmm. Nice idea, Mrs Cullen."

I find squint at the price. €5,000. Holy shit!

"They're really expensive!" I gasp.

"So?" he says, nuzzling me again. "Get used to it, Bella." He releases me and saunters over to the desk where a young woman dressed entirely in white is standing gaping at him. I want to roll my eyes, but turn my attention back to the paintings. Five thousand euros… jeez.

~o~

We have finished lunch and are relaxing over coffee at the Saint Paul hotel. The view of the surrounding countryside is stunning. Vineyards and fields of sunflowers form a patchwork across the plain, interspersed here and there with neat little French farmhouses. It's such a clear, beautiful day we can see all the way to the sea, glinting faintly on the horizon. Edward interrupts my reverie.

"You asked me why I braid your hair," he murmurs. His tone alarms me. He looks… guilty. Shit.

"Yes."

"The crack whore used to let me play with her hair, I think. I don't know if it's a memory or a dream."

Whoa!

He gazes at me, his expression unreadable. My heart leaps into my mouth. What do I say when he says things like this…?

"I like you playing with my hair." My voice is soft, hesitant, as if I'm talking to a child. He blinks at me, his green eyes wide, fearful.

"Do you?"

"Yes." It's the truth. I reach over and grasp his hand. "I think you loved your birth mother, Edward." His eyes widen even more and he gazes at me impassively, saying nothing.

Holy shit. Have I gone too far?

Chapter 91/4

Say something, Fifty – please I beg him with my expression, but he remains resolutely mute, gazing at me with fathomless green eyes, while the silence stretches between us.

What are you thinking, husband of mine? He looks so lost. He stares down at my hand on his and his brow furrows slightly.

"Say something," I whisper, because I cannot bear the silence any longer.

He blinks and then shakes his head, exhaling deeply.

"Let's go," he says releasing my hand and standing. His expression remains guarded. Have I overstepped the mark? I have no idea. My heart sinks and I don't know whether to say anything else or just let it go. I decide on the latter and follow him dutifully out of the restaurant.

In the pretty, narrow street he takes my hand.

"Where do you want to go?" he asks.

He speaks! And he's not mad at me – thank heavens. I exhale, relieved. I shrug.

"I am just glad you're still speaking to me."

"You know I don't like talking about all that shit. It's done. Finished," he says quietly. *No, Edward, it isn't…* The thought saddens me, and for the first time I wonder if it will ever be 'finished', and I realize it probably won't. He'll always be fifty shades… my fifty shades. But do I want to change him? No I don't – only insofar as I want him to feel loved. I peek up at him. He's so beautiful – captivating even – and he's mine. And it's not just the allure of his fine, fine face and his body that has me spellbound – it's what's behind the perfection that draws me, that calls to me on every level… his beautiful, fragile, damaged soul. He gives me that look, down his nose, half amused, half wary, wholly sexy. Then he tucks me under his arm and we make our way through the tourists towards the spot where one identical twin has parked the roomy Audi. I slip my hand into the back pocket of Edward's shorts, grateful that he isn't mad at my presumption… but what four-year-old child doesn't love his Mom, no matter how bad a mom she is? I sigh heavily and hug him closer. I know behind us the security team lurk, and I wonder idly if they've eaten.

Edward stops outside a small boutique selling fine jewelry, gazes in the window, then down at me. He reaches across, grasps my free hand and runs his thumb across the faded red line of the handcuff mark, inspecting it.

"It's not sore," I mutter quickly.

He twists so that my other hand is freed from his pocket. He clasps that hand too, turning it gently over to examine my wrist. The red line is obscured by the platinum Omega watch he gave me at breakfast on our first morning in London. The inscription still makes me swoon.

Isabella
You are my More
My Love, My Life
Edward

In spite of everything, all his fiftyness, my husband can be so romantic. I gaze down at the faint marks on my wrist…. then again, he can be savage sometimes. Releasing my left hand he tilts my chin up with his fingers and scrutinizes my expression, his eyes wide and troubled.

"They don't hurt," I repeat. He pulls my hand to his lips and plants a soft apologetic kiss on the inside of my wrist.

"Come," he says and leads me into the shop.

~o~

"Here," Edward holds open the filigree platinum bracelet he's just purchased. It's exquisite, so delicately crafted, the filigree in the shape of small abstract flowers with small diamonds at their heart. He fastens it around my wrist. It's wide and cuff-like and hides the red marks. *It is also cost around 45,000 euros*, I think, though I couldn't really follow the conversation in French with the sales assistant. I have never worn anything so expensive.

"There, that's better," he murmurs.

"Better?" I whisper, gazing into his burning green eyes, conscious that the stick-thin sales assistant is staring at us with a jealous and disapproving look on her face.

"You know why," Edward says uncertainly.

"I don't need this." I shake my wrist and the cuff moves. The afternoon light streaming through the boutique window dances off the platinum and diamonds, sprinkling small rainbows over the store.

"I do," he says with utter sincerity.

Why? Why does he need this? Does he feel guilty? About what? The marks? His birth mother? Not confiding in me? *Oh Fifty.*

"No, Edward, you don't," I shake my head at him, "You've given me so much already: a magical honeymoon, a beautiful ancient village… and you. I am a very lucky girl," I whisper and his eyes soften.

"No Isabella, I'm a very lucky man."

"Thank you." Stretching up on tiptoes I put my arms around his neck and kiss him… not for giving me the bracelet, but for being mine.

Back in the car he's quiet, gazing out at the fields of bright sunflowers, their heads following and basking in the afternoon sun. One of the twins – I think it's Gaston – is driving and Taylor is beside him up front. Edward is brooding about something. Reaching over I clasp his hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. He turns to look at me, before releasing my hand and stretching his out to caress my knee. I'm wearing a short, full, blue and white skirt, and a blue fitted sleeveless shirt. Edward's hand hesitates and I don't know if it's going to travel up my thigh or down my leg. I tense with anticipation at the gentle touch of his fingers and my breath catches. *What's he going to do*? He chooses down, suddenly grasps my ankle and pulls my foot on to his lap. I swivel my backside so I am facing him in the back of the car.

"I want the other one too," he murmurs authoritatively.

Oh! Why? I glance nervously towards Taylor and Gaston, whose eyes are resolutely on the road ahead, and place my other foot cautiously on his lap. His eyes cool, he reaches over and presses a button located in his door. In front of us, a lightly tinted privacy screen slides out of a panel, and ten seconds later we are effectively on our own. Wow… no wonder the back of this car has so much legroom.

"I want to look at your ankles," Edward offers quietly by way of explanation. His green eyes are anxious. *What now?* The cuff marks? Jeez… I thought we were going to have some fun. If there are marks they are hidden by the sandal straps. I don't recall seeing any this morning. Very gently he strokes his thumb up my right instep, making me wriggle. I can see a smile play on his lips. Deftly he undoes one strap, and his smile fades as he's confronted with the darker red marks.

"Doesn't hurt," I murmur. He glances at me, his expression sad and his mouth a thin line. He nods once, as if he's taking me at my word, while I shake my sandal loose so it falls to the floor… but I know I've lost him. He's distracted and brooding again, mechanically caressing my foot while he turns away to gaze out of the car window once more.

"Hey. What did you expect?" I breathe softly. He glances at me, and shrugs, bewildered.

"I didn't expect to feel like I do looking at these marks," he says softly.

What? Reticent one minute and forthcoming the next? How… *Fifty*! How can I keep up with him?

"How *do* you feel?" I ask gently.

He gazes at me, his eyes glowing a luminous emerald. He's like a deer caught in a flashlight.

"Uncomfortable," he murmurs.

Oh no. I unbuckle my seatbelt and scoot closer to him, leaving my feet in his lap. I want to crawl into his lap and hold him, and I would, if it were just Taylor in the front. But knowing Gaston is there cramps my style, in spite of the glass. If only it were darker. I clutch his hands.

"It's the hickeys I don't like," I whisper. "Everything else… what you did," – I lower my voice even further – "the cuffs. I enjoyed that… well, more than enjoyed. It was mind-blowing. You can do that to me again."

He blinks at me and shifts slightly in his seat. Maybe he's remembering what he did to me yesterday. My inner goddess looks up startled from her Jackie Collins. I flex my toes into his hardening crotch and see rather than hear his sharp intake of breath, his lips parting slightly. He raises his eyebrows and bites his lower lip. He's learnt that from me, surely.

"You should really be wearing your seat belt, Mrs Cullen." His voice is low, and I curl my toes around him. He gasps and his eyes darken, and he clasps my ankle in warning. Does he want me stop? Continue? He pauses and frowns deeply.

What now?

He fishes his ever-present BlackBerry out of his pocket to take an incoming call and glances at his watch. His frown deepens.

"Barney," he snaps.

Crap. Work again interrupting us. I try to remove my feet but his hand tightens on my ankle.

"In the server room?" he says in disbelief. "Did it activate the fire suppression system?"

Fire! I take my feet off his lap and this time he lets me. I sit back in my seat, buckle my seat belt, and fiddle nervously with the forty-five-thousand-euro bracelet. Edward presses the button in his door armrest again and the privacy glass slides down. I realize that this is for Taylor's benefit.

"Anyone injured? … Damage? … I see … When?" Edward glances at his watch again, frowning, then runs his hand through his hair. "No. Not the fire department, or the police. Not yet anyway."

Holy crap! A fire? At Edward's office? I gape at him, my mind racing. Taylor shifts so he can hear Edward's conversation.

"Has he? Good … Okay. I want a detailed damage report. And a complete rundown of everyone who had access over the last five days, including the cleaning staff … Get hold of Angela and get her to call me … Yeah, sounds like the argon is just as effective, worth its weight in gold."

Damage report? Argon? What the hell? It rings a distant bell from chemistry class – an element, I think.

"I realize it's early… Email me in two hours… No, I need to know. Thank you for calling me." Edward hangs up, then immediately punches a number into the BlackBerry.

"Jenks … Good … When?" Edward glances at his watch yet again, "An hour then … yes … Twenty-four-seven at the off-site data store … good." He hangs up.

"Philippe, I need to be onboard within the hour."

"Monsieur."

Shit, it's Philippe, not Gaston. The car surges forward.

Edward glances at me, his expression unreadable.

"Anyone hurt?" I ask quietly.

Edward shakes his head.

"Very little damage." He reaches over and clasps my hand, squeezing it reassuringly, mirroring my actions from earlier. "Don't worry about this. My team is on it." And there he is, the CEO, in command, in control and not flustered at all.

"Where was the fire?"

"Server room."

"Cullen House?"

"Yes."

His responses are clipped, so I know he doesn't want to talk about it. *Why not?*

"Why so little damage?"

"The server room is fitted with a state-of-the-art fire suppression system."

Of course it is.

"Bella, please – don't worry."

"I'm not worried," I lie.

"We don't know for sure that it was arson," he says, cutting to the heart of my anxiety.

Echo Charlie, and now this? Holy crap.

"Please, don't," he whispers, and leaning over kisses my knuckles one by one.

~o~

I am restless. Edward has been holed up in the on-board study for over an hour. I have tried reading, watching TV, sunbathing – fully dressed sunbathing! – but I can't relax… I feel edgy. I change into shorts and a t-shirt, remove the ludicrously expensive bangle and go to find Taylor.

"Mrs Cullen," he says, startled from his Anthony Burgess novel. He's sitting in the small salon outside Edward's study.

"I'd like to go shopping."

"Yes ma'am." He stands.

"I'd like to take the Jet Ski."

His mouth drops open slightly.

"Erm." He frowns, lost for words.

"I don't want to bother Edward with this."

He flushes.

"Mrs Cullen… Um," he stammers, "I don't think Mr Cullen would be very comfortable with that – and I'd like to keep my job."

Oh, for heavens sake! I want to roll my eyes at him, but narrow them instead, sighing heavily and expressing, I think, the right amount of frustrated indignation that I am not mistress of my own destiny. Then again I don't want Edward mad at Taylor – or me, for that matter. Striding confidently past him I knock on the study door and enter. Edward is on his BlackBerry, leaning against the mahogany desk. He gazes at me.

"Angela, hold please," he mutters down the phone, his expression serious, then at me, politely expectant. Shit… why do I feel like I've entered the principal's office? This man had me in handcuffs yesterday. I clear my throat. I refuse to be intimidated by him… and in that moment I realize that this feeling comes from me, not him.

"I'm going shopping. I'll take security with me."

"Sure, take one of the twins, and Taylor too," he says. And I know that whatever's happening is serious, because he doesn't question me further. I stand staring at him, wondering if I can help.

"Anything else?" he asks. He wants me gone. Crap.

"Can I get you anything?" I ask.

He smiles, his sweet shy smile.

"No, baby, I'm good," he says. "The crew will look after me."

"Okay." I want to kiss him. Hell, I can – he's my husband. Strolling purposefully forward I plant a kiss on his lips, surprising him.

"Angela, I'll call you back," he mutters. He puts the BlackBerry down on the desk behind him, pulls me into his embrace and kisses me passionately. I am breathless when he releases me. His eyes are dark and needy.

"You're distracting me. I need to sort this, so I can get back to my honeymoon." He runs an index finger down my face and caresses my chin, tilting my face up.

"Okay. I'm sorry."

“Please don’t apologize, Mrs Cullen. I love your distractions.” He kisses the corner of my mouth.

“Go spend some money,” he breathes and releases me.

“Will do,” I smirk at him and head out of his study. My sub conscious shakes her head and purses her lips. *You didn’t tell him you were going on the Jet Ski,* she admonishes in her sing-song voice. I ignore her… Harpy.

Taylor is patiently waiting.

“That’s all cleared with Headquarters… can we go?” I smile, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. Taylor can’t hide his admiring smile.

“Mrs Cullen, after you.”

~o~

Taylor patiently talks me through the controls on the Jet Ski and how to ride it. He has a calm, gentle authority about him – he’s a good teacher. We are in the motor launch, bobbing and weaving on the calm waters of the harbor beside the Fair Lady. Gaston looks on, his expression hidden by his shades, and one of the Fair Lady’s crew is at the controls of the motor launch. Jeez – three people with me, just because I want to go shopping. I can hardly believe it.

Zipping up my life jacket I give Taylor a beaming grin. He holds out his hand to assist me as I climb on to the Jet Ski.

“Fasten the strap of the ignition key around your wrist, Mrs Cullen. If you fall off, the engine will cut out automatically,” he explains.

“Okay.”

“Ready?’

I nod enthusiastically.

“Press the ignition when you’ve drifted about four feet away from the boat. We’ll follow you.”

“Okay.”

He pushes the Jet Ski away from the launch and it floats gently into the main harbor. When he gives me the 'okay' sign with his fingers I press the ignition button and the engine roars into life.

"Okay Mrs Cullen, easy does it!" Taylor shouts. I squeeze the accelerator. The Jet Ski lurches forward, then stalls.

Crap! How does Edward make it look so easy? I try again, and once again I stall. *Double crap!*

"Just steady on the gas, Mrs Cullen," Taylor calls.

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I mutter under my breath. I try once more, very gently squeezing the lever, and the Jet Ski lurches forward – but this time it keeps going… Yes! It goes some more. Ha ha! It still keeps going! I want to shout and squeal in excitement, but I resist. I cruise gently away from the yacht into the main harbor. Behind me I can hear the roar of the motor launch. When I squeeze the gas further the Jet Ski leaps forward, skating across the water. With the warm breeze in my hair and a fine sea spray on either side of me I feel free. This*rocks!* No wonder Edward never lets me drive.

Rather than heading for the shore and curtailing the fun, I veer round to do a circuit of the stately Fair Lady. Wow – this is so much *fun*. I ignore Taylor and the crew behind me and speed round the yacht for a second time. As I complete the circuit I spot Edward on deck. I think he's gaping at me, though it's difficult to tell. Bravely I lift one hand from the handlebars and wave enthusiastically at him. He looks like he's made of stone – but finally he raises his hand in the semblance of a stiff wave. I can't work out his expression, and something tells me I don't want to – so I head to the marina, speeding across the bluest of blue water that shimmers in the late afternoon sun.

At the quay I wait and let Taylor pull up ahead of me. His expression is bleak, and my heart sinks, though Gaston looks vaguely amused. I wonder briefly if something has happened to chill Gallic-American relations, but deep down I suspect the problem is probably me. Gaston leaps out of the motorboat and ties it to the moorings while Taylor directs me to come alongside. Very gently I ease the Jet Ski into position beside the boat and line up beside him. His expression softens a little.

"Just switch off the ignition, Mrs Cullen," he says calmly, reaching for the handlebars and holding out a hand to help me into the motorboat. I nimbly climb aboard, impressed that I don't fall in.

"Mrs Cullen," Taylor blinks nervously, his cheeks pink once more. "Mr Cullen is not entirely comfortable with you riding on the Jet Ski." He's practically squirming with embarrassment, and I realize he's had an irate Edward on his cell phone. Oh my poor, pathologically over-protective husband, what am I going to do with you?

I smile at Taylor serenely.

"I see. Well Taylor, Mr Cullen is not here, and if he's not *entirely comfortable* he can have the courtesy to tell me himself when I'm back on board."

Taylor winces slightly.

"Very good, Mrs Cullen," he says quietly, handing me my purse. As I turn to clamber out of the boat I catch of a glimpse of his reluctant but admiring smile, and it makes me want to smile too. I cannot believe how fond I am of Taylor, but I really don't appreciate being scolded by him – he's not my father or my husband.

Crap, Edward's mad – and he has enough to worry about at the moment. What was I thinking? As I stand on the quay waiting for Taylor to climb up I feel my BlackBerry vibrating in my purse, and fish it out. Sadé's 'Your Love is King' is my ring tone for Edward… only for Edward.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi," he says.

"I'll come back on the boat. Don't be mad."

I can hear his small gasp of surprise.

"Um…"

"It was fun though," I whisper.

He sighs.

"Well, far be it for me to curtail your fun, Mrs Cullen. Just be careful. Please."

Oh my! Permission to have fun!

"I will. Anything you want from town?"

"Just you, back in one piece."

"I'll make my best endeavors, Mr Cullen"

"I'm glad to hear it, Mrs Cullen."

"We aim to please," I giggle.

I hear his smile.

"I have another call – laters, baby."

"Laters, Edward."

He hangs up. Jet Ski crisis averted, I think. The car is waiting, and Taylor holds the door open for me. I wink at him as I climb in and he can't help himself – he nods and grins at me.

In the car I fire up the email on my BlackBerry.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Thank you
Date: 19 August 2009: 16.55
To: Edward Cullen

For not being too grouchy.
Your loving wife.
xxx

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Trying to stay Calm
Date: 19 August 2009: 16.59
To: Isabella Cullen

You're welcome.
Come back in one piece.
This is not a request.
x

Edward Cullen
Over Protective Husband & CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

His response makes me smile. My control freak.

Why did I want to come shopping? I hate shopping. But deep down I know why, and I walk determinedly past Chanel, Gucci, Dior and the other designer boutiques, and eventually find the antidote to what ails me in a small, overstocked, touristy store. It's a little silver ankle bracelet with small hearts and little bells. It tinkles sweetly and it costs five euros. As soon as I've bought it I put it on. This is me – this is what I like. Immediately I feel more comfortable. I don't want to lose touch with the girl who likes this, ever. Deep down I know that I am not only overwhelmed by Edward himself, but also by his wealth. Will I ever get used to it?

Taylor and Gaston follow me dutifully through the late afternoon crowds and I soon forget they are there. I want to buy something for Edward, something to take his mind off what's happening in Seattle. But what do I buy for the man who has everything? I pause in a small modern square, surrounded by stores, and gaze at each one in turn. When I spy an electronic goods store our visit to the gallery earlier today, and our visit to the Louvre, come back to me. It gives me an idea… a daring idea. My inner goddess throws her Jackie Collins over her shoulder and sits up to pay attention. But I need help – and there's only one person who can help me. I wrestle my BlackBerry out of my purse and call Jake.

"Who…" he mumbles sleepily.

"Jake, it's Bella."

"Bella? Do you have any idea what time it is?" he says grumpily.

Holy crap – time zones.

"Sorry."

"Where are you? You okay?" He sounds more alert now, concerned.

"I'm in Cannes, in the South of France, and I'm fine."

"South of France huh? You in some fancy hotel?"

"Um… no. We're staying on a boat."

"A boat?"

"A big boat," I clarify, sighing.

"Sure." His tone turns sarcastic. Shit… I don't need this right now.

"Jake, I need your advice."

"My advice?" He's stunned. "Sure," he says, and this time he's much more friendly.

I tell him my plan.

Two hours later Taylor helps me out of the motor launch on to the steps up to the deck. Gaston is helping Louis with the Jet Ski. Edward is not on deck and I scurry down to our cabin to wrap his present, feeling a childish sense of delight.

"You were gone some time." Edward startles me just as I am applying the last piece of scotch tape. I turn to find him standing in the doorway to the cabin, watching me intently. Holy shit – am I still in trouble over the Jet Ski? Or is it the fire at his office?

"Everything in control at your office?" I ask tentatively.

"More or less," he breathes, an annoyed frown flitting across his face.

"I did a little shopping," I murmur, hoping to lighten his mood, and praying his annoyance is not directed at me. He smiles warmly, and I know we're okay.

"What did you buy?"

"This," I put my foot up on the bed and show him my ankle chain.

"Very nice," he says. He steps over to me and fondles the tiny bells so that they jingle sweetly round my ankle. He frowns again at the mark left by the cuffs and runs his fingers lightly along the line, sending tingles up my leg.

"And this." I hold out the box, hoping to distract him.

"For me?" he asks in surprise. I nod shyly. He takes the box and shakes it slightly, trying to guess the contents. He grins his boyish, dazzling smile and sits down beside me on the bed. Leaning over he grasps my chin and kisses me.

"Thank you," he breathes.

"You haven't opened it yet."

"I'll love it, whatever it is." He gazes down at me, his green eyes glowing. "I don't get many presents."

"It's hard to buy you things. You have everything."

"I have you."

"You do," I grin at him, flushing slightly. *Oh you so do, Edward.*

He makes short work of the wrapping paper.

"A Nikon!" He glances up at me, slightly puzzled.

"I know you have your compact digital camera but this is for… um… portraits and the like. It comes with two lenses."

He blinks at me, still not understanding.

"Today in the gallery you liked the Florence D'Elle photographs. And I remember what you said in the Louvre. And of course, there were those other photographs…" I swallow, trying my best not to recall the image I found in his closet.

He stops breathing, his eyes widening as realization dawns, and I continue hurriedly before I lose my nerve.

"I thought you might, um… like to take pictures of … me."

Chapter 92/5

"It's much smaller than I expected," I murmur in a hushed tone to Edward. He smirks down at me.

"She reminds me of you."

I gaze at the Mona Lisa, again and even though she's behind protective glass, I can clearly see her notorious smile.

"My smirk?" I glance up at Edward, smirking into glorious green eyes that are alight with mischief.

"Maybe," he teases.

"She reminds me of all your Madonnas."

He blinks for a moment, his impossibly long dark lashes fluttering hesitantly.

"Yes, I suppose she does," he says frowning. He rakes his hand through his hair as he gazes with a puzzled look at Leonardo de Vinci's masterpiece. It's quite crowded in the Louvre, and curious tourists and art lovers alike are jostling to get nearer the famous portrait.

"Shall we move on?" he asks, effectively changing the subject. He takes my hand, giving me very little choice but to follow him towards the Grande Gallerie and the exit of the Denon wing.

~

"What is it with men and naked ladies?" I muse, then realise that the words have popped unbidden out of my mouth. Both Edward and I are admiring the Venus de Milo who stands staring impassively into the distance through the gallery windows towards the Seine, and towards where Taylor is waiting, looking self-conscious. Edward stands behind me, his hand lightly caressing my shoulder.

"The naked female form? We all love to look, Mrs Cullen," he breathes in a low voice. "We can all appreciate the female form, whether in marble, or oils, or film, or satin," he murmurs silkily.

Film… oh no. The unwelcome memory of *that* photograph fills my head.

"I like looking at and appreciating your mighty fine form," he whispers softly against my ear, distracting me from my dark thoughts. He circles his arms around me, pulling me close, my back to his chest. "I look forward to doing some looking and appreciating later." He lightly nips my earlobe, making me squeak, while Aphrodite's statue looks on passively, neutral… armless.

~oOo~

"Pictures. Of you?" he breathes, gaping at me and ignoring the box on his lap.

I nod tentatively, desperately trying to gauge his reaction. Finally he gazes back down at the box, his fingers tracing over the illustration of the camera on the front with fascinated reverence.

What is he thinking? Oh, this is not the reaction I was expecting… and my sub-conscious glares at me like I am some kind of dumb domesticated farm animal, rebuking me that Edward never reacts the way I expect. He looks back up at me, his eyes filled with… what, pain?

Shit… what now?

"Why do you think I want this?" he asks, bemused.

No, no, no! *You said you'd love it…*

"Don't you?" I ask, refusing to acknowledge my sub-conscious who is muttering, barely audibly, why anyone would want erotic photographs of me. Edward swallows and runs a hand through his hair, and he looks so lost, so confused. He takes a deep breath.

"For me, photos like those have usually been an insurance policy, Bella. I know I've objectified women for so long," he says, and pauses awkwardly.

What? Holy cow… where the fuck is this going?

"And you think taking pictures of me is… um, objectifying me? Oh," I mutter. All the air leaves my body, and the blood drains from my face.

He scrunches up his eyes.

"I am so confused," he whispers. When he opens his eyes again, they are wide and wary, full of some raw emotion.

Shit. What has brought this on – Me? My questions earlier about his birth Mom? The fire at his office?

"Why do you say that?" I whisper, panic rising in my throat. I thought he was happy… I thought we were happy… I thought I made him happy. I don't want to *confuse* him. Do I? My mind starts racing. What's brought about this sea-change? He hasn't seen Banner in nearly three weeks… is that it? Is that the reason he's unraveling? Shit, should I call Banner? And in a possibly unique moment of extraordinary depth and clarity, I think I understand – the fire, Echo Charlie, the Jet Ski… He's scared, he's scared for me, and seeing these marks on my skin must bring that home. He's been fussing about them all day, confusing himself because he's not used to feeling uncomfortable about inflicting pain… the thought chills me.

He shrugs and once more his eyes move down to my wrist where the bangle he brought me this afternoon used to be. Bingo!

"Edward, these don't matter," I hold up my wrist, revealing the fading welt. "You gave me a safe word. Shit – yesterday was *fun*. I enjoyed it. Stop brooding on it – I like rough sex, I've told you that before." I flush scarlet as I try to quash my rising panic.

He gazes at me intently and I have no idea what he's thinking. Maybe he's measuring my words … I stumble on.

"Is this about the fire? Do you think it's connected somehow to Echo Charlie? Is this why you're worried? Talk to me, Edward – please."

He stares at me, saying nothing… and the silence expands between us again, like it did this afternoon.

Holy fucking crap! He's not going to talk to me, I know.

"Don't over-think this Edward," I scold quietly, and the words echo, disturbing a memory from the recent past – his words to me about his stupid contract. I reach over, take the box from his lap and open it. He watches me passively as if I were a fascinating alien creature. Knowing that the camera is prepped and ready to go, I fish it out of the box and remove the lens cap. I point the camera at him, so his beautiful anxious face fills the frame. I press the button, and keep it pressed, and ten pictures of Edward's alarmed expression are captured digitally for posterity.

"I'll objectify you then," I murmur, pressing the shutter again. On the final still his lips twitch almost imperceptibly. I press again, and this time he smiles… a small smile, but a smile nevertheless. I hold down the button once more and see him physically relax in front of me, and pout – a full-on, posed, ridiculous 'blue steel' pout, and it makes me grin. *Oh thank heavens*. Mr Mercurial is back – and I've never been so pleased to see him.

"I thought it was *my* present," he mutters sulkily, but I think he's teasing.

"Well, it was supposed to be fun, but it's ended up a symbol of women's oppression." I snap away, taking more pictures of him, and watch the amusement growing on his face, in super close-up. Then his eyes darken, and his expression changes… to predatory.

"You want to be oppressed?" he murmurs silkily.

"Not oppressed. No." I murmur back, snapping again.

"I could oppress you big time, Mrs Cullen," he threatens, his voice husky.

"I know you can, Mr Cullen. And you do, frequently," I tease.

He blinks at me.

Shit. I lower the camera and stare at him.

"What's wrong, Edward?" My voice oozes frustration. *Tell me!*

He says nothing.

Gah! He's so infuriating. I lift the camera to my eye again.

"Tell me," I insist.

"Nothing," he says, and abruptly disappears from the viewfinder.

In one swift smooth move he reaches over, sweeps the camera box onto the cabin floor and grabs me, pushing me down on to the bed. He sits astride me.

"Hey!" I exclaim, and take more photographs of him, smiling down at me with dark intent. He grabs the camera by the lens, and from photographer I become subject, as he points the Nikon at me and presses the shutter down.

"So, you want me to take pictures of you, Mrs Cullen?" he breathes. All I can see of his face is his unruly hair and his sculptured mouth grinning a wicked grin.

"Well, for a start, I think you should be laughing," he says, and with his free hand he tickles me ruthlessly under my ribs, making me squeal and giggle and squirm beneath him, until I grasp his wrist in a vain attempt to make him stop. His grin widens and he renews his efforts, all the while snapping away.

"No! Stop!" I scream.

"Are you kidding?" he growls, and puts the camera down beside us so that he can torture me with both hands.

"Edward!" I splutter, and gasp my laughing protest. He has never, ever tickled me before… *Fuck – stop!* I thrash my head from side to side, trying to wiggle out from under him, giggling and laughing pushing at both of his hands, but he's unrelenting – grinning down at me, enjoying my torment.

"EDWARD, STOP!" I plead and he stops suddenly. Grabbing both of my hands, he holds them down on either side of my head while looming over me. I am panting and breathless with laughter. His breathing mirrors mine, and he gazes down at me with … what? My lungs stop functioning. Wonder? Love? Reverence? Holy Cow… *That look!*

"You. Are. So. Beautiful," he breathes.

I stare up at him, at his dear, dear divine face – I'm bathed in the intensity of his gaze, and it's as if he's seeing me for the first time. Leaning slowly down he kisses me, closing his eyes, enraptured. His response is a wake-up call to my libido… seeing him like this, undone, by me. *Oh my*. He releases my hands and curls his fingers round my head, holding me gently in place, while my fingers slide into his hair and my body rises and fills, responding to his kiss. And all of a sudden the nature of his kiss alters, no longer sweet and reverential and admiring, but carnal, deep and devouring – his tongue invading my mouth, taking not giving, his kiss possessing a desperate needy edge. As desire courses through my blood, awakening every muscle and sinew in its wake, I feel a frisson of alarm.

Oh Fifty, what's wrong?

He inhales sharply and groans.

"Oh, what you do to me," he murmurs, lost and raw. He moves suddenly, lying down on top of me, pressing me into the mattress – one hand cupping my chin, the other skimming over my body, my breast, my waist, my hip and round my behind. He kisses me again, pushing his leg between mine, raising my knee and grinding against me, his erection straining against our clothes and my sex. I gasp and moan against his lips, losing myself to his fervent passion. I dismiss the distant alarm bells in the back of my mind, knowing that he wants me, that he needs me, and that when it comes to communicating with me, this is his favorite form of self-expression. I kiss him with renewed abandon, running my hands through his hair, fisting my fingers, holding tight. He tastes so good and smells of Edward, my Edward.

Abruptly he stops, stands up and pulls me off the bed, so that I am standing in front of him, dazed. He undoes the button on my shorts and kneels quickly, yanking them and my panties down, and before I can breath again I am back on the bed beneath him and he's unbuttoning his flies. Holy cow, he's not taking off his clothes or my t-shirt. He holds my

head and with no preamble whatsoever he thrusts himself inside me, making me cry out – more in surprise than anything else – but I can still hear the hiss of his breath forced through his clenched teeth.

"Yessss…" he sighs close to my ear. He stills, then swivels his hips once, pushing deeper, making me groan.

"I need you," he growls, his voice low and husky. He runs his teeth along my jaw, nipping and sucking, and then he's kissing me again, hard. I wrap my legs and arms around him, cradling and holding him hard against me, determined to wipe out whatever's worrying him, and he starts to move… move like he's trying to climb inside me. Over and over, frantic, primal, desperate, and before I lose myself in the insane rhythm and pace he's setting I briefly wonder once more what's driving him… worrying him… But my body takes over, obliterating the thought, climbing and building so I am awash with sensation, meeting him thrust for thrust. Listening to his harsh breathing, labored and fierce at my ear. Knowing that he's lost in me… I groan loudly, panting, it's so erotic… his need, his need for me. I am reaching… reaching… and he's driving me higher, overwhelming me, taking me… and I want this, I want this so much… for me and for him.

"Come with me," he gasps, and he rears up over me so I have to break my hold around him.

"Open your eyes," he orders. "I need to see you." His voice is urgent, implacable. My eyes flicker open momentarily and the sight of him above me, his face taut with ardor, his eyes raw and glowing with need, his passion and his love, is my undoing, and on cue I come, throwing my head back as my body pulses around him.

"Oh Bella," he cries and he joins my climax, driving into me, then stilling and collapsing onto me. He rolls over so that I am on top of him, sprawled over him, and he's still inside me. As I surface from my orgasm and my body steadies and calms, I want to make some quip about being objectified and oppressed… but wisely, I think, I hold my tongue. I glance up from Edward's chest to examine his face. His eyes are closed and his arms are wrapped around me, clinging… I kiss his chest through the thin fabric of his linen shirt.

"Tell me Edward, what's wrong?" I ask softly and wait anxiously to see if even now, sated by sex, he'll tell me. I feel his arms tighten around me further but it's his only response. He's not going to talk.

Inspiration hits me.

"I give you my solemn vow to be your faithful partner in sickness and in health, to stand by your side in good times and in bad, to share your joy as well as your sorrow," I murmur.

He freezes. His only movement is to open wide his fathomless green eyes and gaze at me as I continue my wedding vows.

"*I promise to love you unconditionally, to support you in your goals and dreams, to honor and respect you, to laugh with you and cry with you, to share my hopes and dreams with you and bring you solace in times of need.*" I pause, willing him to talk to me. He watches me, his lips slightly parted, but says nothing.

"*And to cherish you for as long as we both shall live,*" I sigh.

"Oh, Bella," he whispers, and he moves again, breaking our precious contact so that we're lying side by side. He strokes my face with the back of his knuckles.

"*I solemnly vow that I will safeguard and hold dear and deep in my heart our union and you,"* he whispers, his voice hoarse. *"I promise to love you faithfully forsaking all others, through the good times and the bad, in sickness or in health, regardless of where life takes us. I will protect you, trust you and respect you. I will share your joys and sorrows and comfort you in times of need. I promise to cherish you and uphold your hopes and dreams and keep you safe at my side. All that is mine is now yours. I give you my hand, my heart, and my love, from this moment on for as long as we both shall live.*"

Tears spring to my eyes. His face softens as he gazes at me.

"Don't cry," he murmurs, his thumb catching and dispatching a stray tear.

"Why won't you talk to me? Please, Edward."

He closes his eyes as if in pain.

"I vowed I would bring you solace in times of need. Please don't make me break my vows."

He sighs and opens his eyes, his expression bleak.

"It's arson," he says simply and he looks suddenly so young and vulnerable.

Oh fuck.

"And my biggest worry," he continues, "Is that they are after me. And if they are after me – " He stops, unable to continue.

"Whoever they are – they might get me," I whisper.

He blanches and I know that I have finally uncovered the root of his anxiety. Reaching up I caress his face.

"Thank you," I murmur.

He frowns.

"What for?"

"For telling me."

He shakes his head and a ghost of a smile touches his lips.

"You can be very persuasive, Mrs Cullen," he smirks.

"And you can brood and internalize all your feelings and worry yourself to death. You'll probably die of a heart attack before you're forty, and I want you around far longer than that."

"Mrs Cullen, *you'll* be the death of me. The sight of you on the Jet Ski – I nearly had a coronary." He flops back on the bed and puts his hand over his eyes, and I feel him shudder.

"Edward, it's a Jet Ski. Even kids ride Jet Skis. Can you imagine what you'll be like when we visit your place in Aspen, and I go skiing for the first time?"

He gasps and turns to face me, and I want to laugh at the horror on his face.

"Our place," he says firmly. I ignore him.

"I'm a grown-up, Edward – and much tougher than I look. When are you going to learn this?"

He shrugs, and his mouth thins slightly. I decide to change the subject.

"So, the fire. Do the police know about the arson?"

"Yes," he says his expression serious.

"Good," I mutter.

"Security is going to get tighter," he adds matter-of-factly.

"I understand."

I glance down his body. He's still wearing his shorts and his shirt, and I still have my t-shirt on. Jeez – talk about wham bam thank you ma'am. The thought makes me giggle.

"What?" Edward asks, bemused.

"You."

"Me?"

"Yes. You. Still dressed."

"Oh." He glances down at himself, then back at me, and his face erupts into an enormous smile.

"Well, you know how hard it is for me to keep my hands off you, Mrs Cullen – especially when you're giggling like a school girl."

Oh yes – the tickling. Gah! The Tickling. I move quickly so that I am sitting astride him, but immediately understanding my evil intent he grabs both of my wrists.

"No," he says, and he means it.

I pout at him, but decide that he's not ready for this.

"Please don't," he whispers. "I couldn't bear it. I was never tickled as a child." He pauses and I relax my hands so he doesn't have to restrain me.

"I used to watch Carlisle with Emmett and Alice… tickling them… and it looked like such fun, but I… I…"

I place my index finger on his lips.

"Hush… I know," I murmur, and bending down plant a soft kiss on his lips where my finger has just been, then curl up on his chest. Inside me the familiar painful ache swells and the profound sadness that I hold in my heart for Edward as a little boy seizes me once more, and I know I would do anything for this man, because I love him so.

He puts his arms around me and presses his nose into my hair, inhaling deeply, as he gently strokes one hand rhythmically down my back. I don't know how long we lie there… but eventually I break the comfortable silence between us.

"What is the longest you've gone without seeing Dr Banner?"

"Two weeks. Why? Do you have an incorrigible urge to tickle me?"

"No," I chuckle. "I think he helps you."

Edward snorts

"He should do, I pay him enough."

He pulls my hair softly, turning my face to look up at him. I lift my head and he gazes at me.

"Are you concerned for my well-being, Mrs Cullen?" he asks softly.

"Every good wife is concerned for her beloved husband's well-being, Mr Cullen," I admonish him teasingly.

"Beloved?" he whispers, and it's a poignant question hanging between us.

"Very much beloved." I scoot up to kiss him, and he smiles his shy smile.

"Do you want to go ashore to eat, Mrs Cullen?"

"I want to eat wherever you're happiest."

"Good," he grins. "Aboard it is, where I can keep you safe. Thank you for my present." He reaches over and grabs the camera, and holding it at arm's length he snaps the two of us in our post-tickling, post-coital, post-confessional embrace.

"The pleasure is all mine," I smile and his eyes light up.

~oOo~

We wander through the opulent gilt splendour of the eighteenth century Palace of Versailles. Once a humble hunting lodge, it was transformed by the Roi Soleil into a magnificent, lavish seat of power, but even before the eighteenth century ended it saw the last of those absolute monarchs.

The most stunning room by far is the Hall of Mirrors. The early afternoon light floods through windows to the west, lighting up the mirrors that line the east wall, illuminating the gold leaf décor and the enormous crystal chandeliers. It's breathtaking.

"Interesting to see what becomes of a despotic autocrat who isolates himself in such splendour," I murmur to Edward as he stands at my side. He gazes down and cocks his head to one side, regarding me with humor.

"Your point, Mrs Cullen?"

"Oh, merely an observation, Mr Cullen." I wave my hand airily at the surroundings. Smirking he follows me to the centre of the room where I stand and gawp at

the view – the spectacular gardens reflected in the looking-glass and the spectacular Edward Cullen, my husband, reflected back at me, his gaze bold and green.

"I would build this for you," he whispers, "Just to see the way the light burnishes your hair, right here, right now." He tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "You look like an angel." He kisses me just below my earlobe, takes my hand in his and murmurs, "We despots do that, for the women we love."

I flush at his compliment, smiling shyly, and follow him through the vast room.

~oOo~

"What are you thinking about?" Edward asks softly, taking a sip of his after-dinner coffee.

"Versailles."

"Ostentatious, wasn't it?" He grins.

I glance around the more understated grandeur of the Fair Lady's dining room and purse my lips.

"This is hardly ostentatious," Edward says, a tad defensively.

"I know. It's lovely. The best honeymoon a girl could want."

"Really?" he says, genuinely surprised. And he smiles his shy smile.

"Of course it is."

"We've only got two more days – is there anything you'd like to see? Anything you'd like to do?"

"Just be with you," I murmur.

Rising from the table he comes round to me and kisses me on the forehead.

"Well, can you do without me for about an hour? I need to check my emails, find out what's happening at home."

"Sure," I say brightly, trying to hide my disappointment. Is it freaky that I want to be with him all the time? My subconscious presses her lips into a narrow, unattractive line and nods vigorously.

"Thank you for the camera," he murmurs, and heads for the study.

Back in our cabin I decide to catch up on my correspondence and open my laptop. There are emails from my Mom and from Rose, giving me the latest gossip from home and asking how the honeymoon is going. Well, great, until someone decided to burn down CEH inc… jeez. As I finish my response to my Mom, an email from Rose hits my inbox.

From: Rosalie L Hale
Date: 19 August 2009 11.45 PST
To: Isabella Cullen
Subject: OMG!!!!

Bella, just heard about the fire at Edward's office.
Do you think it's arson?
R xox

Rose is online! I jump on to my new found toy – Skype messaging – and see that she's available. I quickly type a message.

Bella: Hey are you there?
Rosie: YES BELLA! How are you? How's the Honeymoon? Did you see my email? Does Edward know about the fire?
Bella: I'm good. Honeymoon's great. Yes I saw your email. Yes Edward knows.
Rosie: I thought he would. News is sketchy on what happened. And Emmett won't tell me anything.
Bella: Are you fishing for a story?
Rosie: You know me too well.
Bella: Edward hasn't told me much.
Rosie: Emmett heard from Esme!

Oh no – I'm sure Edward doesn't want this broadcast all over Seattle. I try my patented distract-tenacious-Hale technique.

Bella: How's Emmett and Jasper?
Rosie: Jasper has been accepted on to the psyche masters course at Seattle. Emmett is adorable.
Bella: Way to go Jasper.
Rosie: How's our favourite ex-dom?
Bella: ROSE!
Rosie: What?
Bella: YOU KNOW WHAT!
Rosie: K. Sorry
Bella: He's fine. More than fine.
Rosie: Well as long as you're happy I'm happy.
Bella: I'm blissfully happy.
Rosie: J I have to run. Can we talk later?

Bella: Not sure. See if I am online. Time zones suck!
Rosie: They do. Love you Bella.
Bella: Love you too, Laters. x
Rosie: Laters. <3

Trust Rose to be on it. I roll my eyes at the screen and shut Skype down before Edward sees the chat. He wouldn't appreciate the ex-dom comment – and I'm not sure he's entirely ex…

I sigh loudly. Rose knows everything, since our tipsy evening three weeks before the wedding, when I finally succumbed to the Hale inquisition… and it was a relief to finally talk to someone. I glance at my watch. It's been about an hour since dinner, and I am missing my husband. I head back on deck to see if he's finished his work.

~o~

I am in the Hall of Mirrors and Edward is standing beside me, smiling down at me with love and affection. *You look like an angel*. I beam back at him, but when I glance into the looking glass I'm standing on my own and the room is grey and drab. *No!* My head whips back to his face, to find his smile is sad and wistful. Reaching up he tucks my hair behind my ear. Then he turns wordlessly and walks away slowly, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the mirrors, as he paces the enormous room to the ornate double doors at the end… a man on his own, a man with no reflection… and I wake, gasping for air, as panic seizes me.

"Hey," he whispers from beside me in the darkness, his voice filled with concern.

Oh, he's here. He's safe. Relief courses through me.

"Oh, Edward," I mumble, trying to bring my pounding heartbeat under control. He wraps me in his arms and it's only then that I realize I have tears streaming down my face.

"Bella, what is it?" He strokes my cheek, wiping away my tears, and I can hear his anguish.

"Nothing," I stutter. "A silly nightmare."

He kisses my forehead and my tearstained cheeks, comforting me.

"Just a bad dream, baby," he murmurs. "I've got you. I'll keep you safe."

Drinking in his scent I curl around him, trying to ignore the loss and devastation I felt in my dream… and in that moment I know that my deepest, darkest fear would be losing him.

Chapter 93/6

I stir, instinctively reaching over to Edward's side of the bed only to feel his absence. Shit! I wake instantly and look anxiously round the cabin. Edward is sitting in the small upholstered armchair by the bed watching me. Stooping down he places something on the floor, then lies down on the bed beside me. He's dressed in his cut-offs and a grey t-shirt.

"Hey, don't panic. Everything's fine," he says, his voice gentle and soothing – like he's talking to a cornered wild animal. Tenderly he smoothes the hair back from my face and I calm immediately. I see him trying and failing to hide his own concern.

"You've been so jumpy these last couple of days," he murmurs, his eyes wide and serious.

"I'm okay, Edward. Good morning." I give him my brightest smile because I don't want him to know how worried I am about the whole arson incident. The painful recollection of how I felt when Echo Charlie was sabotaged and Edward went missing – the hollow emptiness, the indescribable pain – continually re-surfaces and nags me, gnawing at my heart. Keeping the smile fixed on my face I try to repress the memory.

"Were you watching me sleep?"

"Yes," he says gazing at me steadily, studying me. "You were talking."

"Oh?" *Shit! What was I saying?*

"You're worried," he adds.

I blink at him. Is there nothing I can keep from this man? He leans forward and kisses me between my brows.

"When you frown a little v forms just here," he breathes. "It's very soft to kiss. Don't worry baby, I'll look after you."

"It's not me I'm worried about – it's you," I grumble. "Who's looking after you?"

He smiles indulgently at my tone.

"I'm big enough and ugly enough to look after myself. Come. Get up. There's one thing I'd like to do before we head home." He grins at me, a big boyish yes-I'm-really-only-twenty-eight grin, and swats my behind. I yelp, startled, and realize that today we're going back to Seattle… and my melancholy blossoms. I don't want to leave. I've relished being

with him 24/7… I'm not ready to share him with his Company and his family. We've had a blissful honeymoon. With a few ups and downs, I admit, but that's normal for a newly married couple… surely.

But Edward cannot contain his boyish excitement, and despite my dark thoughts it's infectious. When he rises gracefully off the bed I follow, intrigued. What has he got in mind?

~o~

Edward straps the key to my wrist.

"You want me to drive?"

"Yes." Edward grins. "That's not too tight?"

"It's fine. Is that why you're wearing a lifejacket?" I arch my eyebrow.

"Yes."

I can't help my giggle.

"Such confidence in my driving capabilities, Mr Cullen."

"As ever, Mrs Cullen."

"Well, don't lecture me," I warn.

Edward holds his hands up in a defensive gesture, but he's smiling.

"Would I dare?"

"Yes you would, and yes you do, and we can't pull over and argue on the sidewalk here."

"Point taken, Mrs Cullen. Are we going to stand on this platform all day debating your driving skills, or are we going to have some fun?"

"Point taken, Mr Cullen." I grasp the handlebars of the Jet Ski and climb on. Edward climbs on behind me and kicks us away from the yacht. Taylor and two of the deck hands look on in amusement. Sliding forward Edward wraps his arms around me and snuggles his thighs tightly against mine. Yes, this is what I like about this form of transport. I plug in the ignition key and push the start button, and the engine roars into life.

"Ready?" I shout to Edward over the noise.

"As I'll ever be," he says, his mouth close to my ear.

Gently I pull on the lever and the Jet Ski moves away from the Fair Lady, far too sedately for my liking. Edward tightens his embrace. I pull on the gas some more and we shoot forward. I am beyond delighted that we don't stall.

"Whoa!" Edward calls from behind, but I can hear the exhilaration in his voice. I speed past the Fair Lady towards the open sea. We're anchored outside the Port de Plaisance de Saint-Laurent-du-Var, Nice airport nestling in the distance, built into the Mediterranean, or so it seems. I've heard the odd plane landing since we arrived last night. We need to take a closer look, I decide.

We shoot towards it, skipping rapidly over the waves. I love this, and I'm thrilled Edward's letting me drive. All the worry I've felt over the past two days melts away as we skim towards the airport.

"Next time we do this we'll have two Jet Skis," Edward shouts. I can't help my grin – the thought of racing him is thrilling.

As we zoom over the cool blue sea towards what looks like the end of the runway, I'm startled suddenly by the thundering roar of a jet overhead as it comes in to land. It's so loud I panic, swerving and hitting the throttle at the same time, mistaking it for a brake.

"BELLA!" Edward shouts, but it's too late. I am catapulted off the side of the Jet Ski, arms and legs flailing, taking Edward with me in a very spectacular splash.

Screaming I plunge into the crystal blue sea and swallow a nasty mouthful of the Mediterranean. The water is cold this far from the shore, but I surface within a split second, courtesy of my life jacket. Coughing and spluttering I wipe the seawater from my eyes and look around for Edward. He's already swimming towards me. The Jet Ski floats inoffensively a few feet away from us, its engine silent.

"You okay?" Edward gasps as he reaches me.

"Yes," I croak, but I cannot contain my elation. See Edward? That's the worst that can happen on a Jet Ski!

He pulls me into his embrace, then grabs my head between his hands, examining my face closely.

"See, that wasn't so bad!" I grin as we tread water.

Eventually he smirks at me, obviously relieved.

"No, I guess it wasn't. Except I'm wet," he grumbles, but his tone is playful.

"I'm wet too."

"I like you wet." He leers at me.

"Edward!" I scold, but can't help my giggle.

He grins, looking gorgeous, then leans in and kisses me, hard. When he pulls away I'm breathless. His eyes are darker, hooded and heated, and I'm warm in spite of the cold water.

"Come. Let's head back. Now we have to shower. I'll drive."

~o~

We laze in the British Airways first class lounge at Heathrow in London, waiting for our connecting flight to Seattle. Edward is engrossed in the Financial Times of London. I reach over for his camera, wanting to take some photographs of him. He looks so sexy in his trademark white linen shirt and jeans, and his aviator specs tucked into the v of his open shirt. The flash disturbs him. He blinks up at me and smiles his shy smile.

"How are you, Mrs Cullen?" he asks.

"Sad to be going home," I murmur. "I like having you to myself."

He reaches out and clasps my hand, and lifting it to his lips, grazes my knuckles with a sweet kiss.

"Me too," he says.

"…But?" I ask, hearing that small word unsaid at the end of his simple statement.

He frowns slightly.

"But?" he says disingenuously.

I cock my head to one side, gazing at him with the TELL ME! expression I have been perfecting over the last couple of days. He sighs, putting the newspaper down.

"I want this arsonist caught and out of our lives," he says with surprising bluntness.

"Oh." That seems fair enough.

"I'll have Jenks' balls on a platter if he lets anything like that happen again," Edward says, and a shiver runs down my spine at his menacing tone. He gazes at me impassively, and I don't know if he's daring me to be flippant or what. I do the only thing I can think of to ease the sudden tension between us, and raise the camera and snap another photograph.

~o~

"Hey, sleepyhead, we're home," Edward murmurs.

"Hmmm," I mumble, reluctant to leave my tantalizing dream of Edward and I on a picnic blanket at Kew Gardens. I am so tired. Travelling is exhausting, even in first class. We've been up for eighteen or more hours straight, I think – in my fatigue I've lost track. I hear my door open, and Edward is leaning over me. He unbuckles my seat belt and lifts me into his arms, waking me.

"Hey, I can walk!" I protest sleepily.

He snorts.

"I need to carry you over the threshold."

I put my arms around his neck.

"Up all sixty floors?" I quirk my lips up in a challenging smile.

"Mrs Cullen, I am very pleased to announce that you've put on some weight."

"What?"

He grins.

"So if you don't mind, we'll use the elevator." He narrows his eyes at me, though I can tell he's teasing. Taylor opens the doors to the Escala lobby for us.

"Welcome home Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen," he says smiling at both of us.

"Thanks Taylor," says Edward. I give Taylor the briefest of smiles and watch him head back to the Mercedes where Stuart waits at the wheel.

"What do you mean I've put on weight?" I glare at Edward. His grin broadens and he clasps me closer to his chest as he carries me across the lobby.

"Not much," he assures me but his face darkens suddenly, disturbing me.

Oh No… what now?

"What is it?" I breathe, trying to control the alarm I hear in my own voice.

"You've put on some of the weight you lost when you left me," he explains quietly as he summons the elevator. A bleak expression crosses his face.

No! His sudden, surprising anguish tugs at my heart.

"Hey," I snap. I curl my fingers around his face and into his hair, pulling him towards me. He comes willingly.

"If I hadn't gone, would you be standing here, like this, now?" I whisper. His eyes melt, the colour of soft moss, and he smiles his shy smile… my favourite smile.

"No," he breathes and steps into the elevator still holding me. He leans down and kisses me gently.

"No, Mrs Cullen, I wouldn't." He runs his nose down mine. "But I would know I could keep you safe, because you wouldn't defy me."

He sounds slightly regretful… *shit.*

"I like defying you." I test the waters.

"I know. And it's made me so… happy," he says, smiling down at me through his bemusement.

Oh thank heavens.

"Even though I'm fat?" I whisper.

He laughs.

"Even though you're fat." He kisses me again, more heated this time, and my fingers fist in his hair holding him against me, our tongues twisting and turning in a slow sensual dance with each other. When the elevator pings to a halt at the penthouse we are both breathless.

"Very happy," he breathes. His smile is darker now, his eyes hooded and full of salacious promise. He shakes his head as if to recover himself, and turning walks into the foyer.

"Welcome home, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs. He kisses me again, more chastely this time, and gives me the full-gigawatt-patented-Edward-Cullen smile, his eyes dancing with joy.

"Welcome home, Mr Cullen," I beam up at him, my heart answering his call, brimming with my own joy. I think Edward's going to put me down, but he doesn't. He carries me through the foyer across the corridor and into the great room, and deposits me on the kitchen island where I sit with my legs hanging down. Opening a kitchen cupboard he pulls out two champagne flutes, then takes a bottle of chilled champagne from the fridge… our favorite Bollinger. Placing the glasses beside me he deftly opens the bottle with a practised flourish, not spilling a drop. He pours the pale pink champagne into each glass, puts the bottle down, picks up one glass and hands it to me. Taking up the other, he gently parts my legs, and moves forward to stand between them.

"Here's to us, Mrs Cullen," he breathes.

"To us, Mr Cullen," I whisper and smile shyly. We clink glasses and take a sip.

"I know you're tired," he whispers, rubbing his nose against mine, "But I'd really like to go to bed, and not to sleep." He kisses the corner of my mouth. "It's our first night back here, and you're really mine…" His voice drifts off as he plants soft kisses down my throat. It's only early evening in Seattle, and I am dog-tired, but deep inside desire blooms deep in my belly and my inner goddess purrs…

~o~

Edward is slumbering peacefully beside me as I stare at the pale pink and golden streaks of the new dawn through the vast windows. His arm is draped loosely over me, and I try to match his breathing in an effort to get back to sleep, but it's hopeless. I am wide-awake, my body clock on Greenwich Mean Time, my mind racing.

So much has happened in the last three weeks – who am I kidding, the last three months – I feel that my feet haven't touched the ground. And now here I am, Bella Swan – Mrs Isabella Cullen – married to the most delicious, sexy, philanthropic, absurdly wealthy, fucked-up mogul a woman could meet. How did this all happen so fast?

I shift carefully onto my side to gaze at him, appraising his beauty. I know he watches me sleeping, and I rarely get the opportunity to repay the compliment. He looks so young and carefree in his sleep, his long lashes fanned against his cheek, a light smattering of stubble covering his jaw, and his sculptured lips slightly parted, relaxed as he breathes deeply. I want to kiss him, to push my tongue between his lips, run my fingers over his soft yet prickly stubble. I really have to fight the urge not to touch him, not to disturb him. Hmmm… I could just tease his earlobe with my teeth and suck… My subconscious glares up at me over her half-moon spectacles, distracted from Volume Two of the Collected Works of Charles Dickens, and mentally chastises me – *Leave the poor man alone, Bella*.

I have to go back to work on Monday. We have today to reacclimatise, then we're back into our routine. It will be odd not seeing Edward for a whole day, after spending almost every minute together for the last three weeks. I lie back and stare at the ceiling. One would think that spending so much time together would be suffocating, but that's just not the case. I've loved each and every minute, even our fighting. Every minute… except the news of the fire at Cullen House.

My blood chills. Who could want to harm Edward? My mind gnaws at this mystery again. Someone in his business? An ex? A disgruntled employee? I have no idea, and Edward remains tight-lipped about it all, drip-feeding me the minimum information he can get away with, in a bid to protect me. I sigh. My shining white and dark knight, always trying to protect me. What am I going to do with him to make him open up more?

He stirs, and I still, not wanting to wake him, but it has the opposite effect. Damn! Two bright green eyes gaze at me, blinking.

"What's wrong?" he asks immediately.

"Nothing. Go back to sleep." I try my reassuring smile.

He stretches his fine long body next to mine, rubs his face then grins at me.

"Jet lag?" he asks.

"Is that what this is? I can't sleep."

"I have the universal panacea right here, just for you, baby." He grins like a schoolboy, making me roll my eyes and giggle at the same time… and just like that my dark thoughts are swept aside and my teeth find his earlobe.

~o~

Edward and I cruise north on the I-5 towards the 520 bridge in the Audi R8. We are going to have lunch at his parents', a welcome-home Sunday lunch. All the family will be there, plus Rose and Jasper. It will be strange to be in so much company when we've been on our own for so long. I haven't had an opportunity to talk to Edward most of the morning – he was holed up in his study while I unpacked. He said I didn't have to, that Mrs Cope would do it. That's something else I need to get a handle on – having domestic help. I run my fingers absentmindedly over the leather upholstery of the door to distract my wondering thoughts. I feel out of sorts. Is it the jet lag? The arson?

"Would you let me drive this?" I ask half to myself, surprised that I say the words out loud.

"Of course," Edward replies, smiling. "What's mine is yours. If you dent it though, I will take you into the red room of pain." He glances swiftly at me with a malicious grin.

Shit! I gape at him. Is this a joke?

"You're kidding. You'd punish me for denting your car. You love your car more than you love me?" I tease.

"It's close," he says and reaches across to squeeze my knee. "But she doesn't keep me warm at night."

"I'm sure it could be arranged. You could sleep in her," I snap tartly.

Edward laughs.

"We haven't been home one day and you're kicking me out already?" He seems delighted. I gaze at him and he grins a face-splitting grin… and although I want to be mad at him, it's impossible when he's in this kind of mood. Now that I think about it he's been in a better frame of mind ever since he left his study this morning. And it dawns on me that I'm being petulant because we have to go back to reality, and I don't know if he's going to revert to the more closed pre-honeymoon Edward, or if I'll get to keep the new improved version.

"Why are you so pleased?" I ask.

He flashes yet another grin at me.

"Because this conversation is so… normal."

"Normal!" I snort. "Not after three weeks of marriage! Surely."

His smile slips slightly.

"I'm kidding, Edward," I mutter quickly, not wanting to kill his mood. It strikes me how unsure he is of himself sometimes. I suspect that he's always been like this, but has just hidden his uncertainty beneath an intimidating exterior. He's very easy to tease, probably because he's not used to it. It's a revelation, and I marvel again that we still have so much to learn about each other.

"Don't worry, I'll stick to the Saab," I mutter, and turn to stare out of the window, trying to shake off my bad mood.

"Hey," he says. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You're so frustrating sometimes, Bella. Tell me."

I turn and smirk at him.

"Back at you, Cullen."

He frowns.

"I'm trying," he says softly.

"I know. Me too." I smile at him and my mood brightens slightly.

~o~

Carlisle looks frankly ridiculous in his chef's hat and "Licensed to Grill" apron as he stands at the BBQ. Every time I look at him it makes me smile. In fact, my spirits have lifted considerably. We are all sitting around the table on the terrace of the Cullen family home, enjoying the late summer sun. Esme and Alice are setting various salads out on the table, while Emmett and Edward trade friendly insults and discuss plans for the new house, and Jasper and Rose grill me about our honeymoon. Edward keeps hold of my hand, his fingers toying with my wedding and engagement rings.

"So if you can get the plans finalized with Tanya, I have a window September through to mid November," says Emmett. "I can get the whole crew on it." He stretches and drops an arm around Rose's shoulder, making her smile.

"Tanya is due tomorrow evening," replies Edward. "I hope we can finalize everything then." He turns and looks expectantly at me.

Oh… this is news.

"Sure." I smile at him, mostly for the benefit of his family, but my spirit take a nosedive again. Why does he make these decisions without telling me? Or is it the thought of Tanya – all lush hips and full breasts and expensive designer clothes and perfume – smiling too provocatively at my husband? My subconscious glares at me. *He's given you no reason to be jealous.* Shit, I am up and down today. What's wrong with me?

"Bella," Rose exclaims, snapping me out of my reverie. "You still in the South of France?"

"Yes," I smile.

"You look so well," she says, though she frowns as she says it.

"You both do," Esme beams. Emmett refills our glasses.

"To the happy couple." Carlisle grins and raises his glass, and the sentiment is echoed round the table.

"And congratulations to Jasper for getting on the psych course at Seattle," chips in Alice proudly. She smiles at him and Jasper gives her a quick, heated smile back. Oh… I flush, seeing what passes between them. I recognize that look.

"Congratulations," we say in unison, and I grin at the pair of them, knowing full well what they have been up to.

I listen to the banter round the table. Edward is running through our extensive itinerary over our last three weeks, embellishing here and there. He sounds relaxed and in control, the worry of the arsonist forgotten. I on the other hand don't seem to be able to shake my mood. I pick at my food. Edward said I was fat yesterday. *He was joking!* My subconscious glares at me again. Emmett accidentally knocks his glass onto the terrace, startling everyone, and there's a sudden flurry of activity to get it cleaned up.

"I am going to take you to the boathouse and finally spank you in there, if you don't snap out of this mood," Edward whispers to me.

I gasp with shock, turn and gape at him. *What?* Is he teasing me?

"You wouldn't dare!" I growl at him and from deep inside I feel a familiar, welcome excitement. He cocks an eyebrow at me. Of course he would. I glance quickly at Rose across the table. She's watching us with interest. I turn back to Edward, narrowing my eyes at him.

"You'd have to catch me first – and I'm wearing flats," I hiss.

"I'd have fun trying," he breathes, smiling warmly at me and I *think* he's joking.

I flush. Confusingly, I feel better.

As we finish our dessert of strawberries and cream the heavens open, unexpectedly soaking us. We all leap up to clear the plates and glasses from the table, depositing them in the kitchen.

"Good thing the weather held off till we finished," Esme says pleased, as we drift into the back room den. Edward sits down at the shining black upright piano, presses the quiet pedal and starts to play a familiar tune that I can't immediately place.

Esme asks me for my impressions of Saint Paul de Vence. She and Carlisle went years ago during their honeymoon, and it occurs to me that this is a good omen, seeing how happy they are together now. Rose and Emmett are cuddling on the one of the large overstuffed couches, while Jasper, Alice and Carlisle are deep in conversation, about psychology, I think.

Suddenly, as one, all the Cullens stop talking, and gape at Edward.

What?

Edward is singing softly to himself at the piano. Silence descends on us all as we strain to hear his soft, lyrical voice. I've heard him sing before… haven't they? He stops, suddenly conscious of the deathly hush that's fallen over the room. Rose glances questioningly at me and I shrug. Edward turns on the stool and flushes, embarrassed to realize he's become the centre of attention.

"Go on," Esme urges softly. "I've never heard you sing, Edward. Ever." She gazes in wonder at him. He sits on the piano stool blinking absently at her, and after a beat he shrugs slightly. His eyes flicker nervously towards me, then over to the French windows. The rest of the room suddenly erupts in self-conscious chatter, and I'm left gazing at Edward.

Esme distracts me, grasping my hands and suddenly folding me in her arms.

"Oh darling girl! Thank you, thank you," she breathes, so only I can hear. It brings a lump to my throat.

"Um…" I hug her back, not really sure why I am being thanked. Esme smiles down at me, her eyes shining, and kisses my cheek.

Oh my… What have I done?

"I am going to make some tea," she says, her voice soft with unshed tears.

I amble over to Edward who is now standing staring out through the French windows.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi," he says. He puts his arm around my waist, pulling me to him, and I slip my hand into his back jeans pocket. We gaze out at the rain.

"Feeling better?" he asks.

I nod.

"Good."

"You certainly know how to silence a room."

"I do it all the time," he whispers, and he grins down at me.

"At work, yes, but not here."

"True, not here."

"No-one's ever heard you sing? Ever?"

"It appears not," he says dryly. "Shall we go?"

I gaze up at him, trying to gauge his mood. His eyes are soft and warm, and slightly bemused. I decide to change the subject.

"You going to spank me?" I breathe.

He gazes down at me, his eyes darkening.

"I don't want to hurt you, but I'm more than happy to play," he murmurs.

"Oh." I glance nervously round the large room, but we are out of earshot.

"Only if you misbehave, Mrs Cullen," he whispers softly in my ear.

How can he put some much sensual promise into six words?

"I'll see what I can do," I grin.

Once we've said our goodbyes we walk over to the car.

"Here." Edward throws me the keys to the R8. "Don't bend it!" he adds in all seriousness, shaking his head. "Or I will be fucking pissed."

My mouth goes dry. He's letting me drive his car? My inner goddess whips on her leather driving gloves and flat shoes. *Oh yes!* She cries.

"Are you sure?" I mouth, stunned.

"Before I change my mind. Yes."

I don't think I have ever grinned so hard. He rolls his eyes and opens the driver's door so that I can climb in. I start the engine before he's even reached the passenger side, and he jumps in quickly.

"Keen, Mrs Cullen?" he asks with a wry smile.

"Very."

Slowly I ease the car backwards and turn it in the driveway. I manage not to stall it, surprising myself. Boy, is the clutch sensitive. Slowly navigating the driveway, I glance in my rear view mirror to see Stuart and Ryan – our security for the day – climb into the Merc. I had no idea that they'd followed us here. I pause before I set out on to the main road.

"You're sure about this?"

"Yes," Edward says tightly, telling me he's not sure about this at all. Oh my poor, poor Fifty. I want to laugh, at both him and myself, because I'm so nervous and excited. A small part of me wants to lose Stuart and Ryan, just for the kicks. I check for traffic then inch the R8 out slowly on to the road. I can feel Edward curl up with tension beside me and I can't resist. The road is clear. I put my foot down on the gas and we shoot forward.

"Whoa! Bella!" Edward shouts. "Slow down – you'll kill us both."

I immediately ease off on the gas. Wow, can this car move!

"Sorry," I mutter, trying to sound contrite and failing miserably. Edward smirks at me, to hide his relief, I think..

"Well, that counts as misbehaving," he says casually and I slow right down.

I glance in the rear view mirror. No sign of the Merc, just a solitary dark car with tinted windows behind us. I imagine Stuart and Ryan flustered, frantic to catch up, and for some reason this gives me a thrill. But I decide to behave and I drive steadily, with growing confidence, back towards the 520 bridge. I don't want to give my husband a coronary.

Suddenly Edward swears and struggles to pull his BlackBerry from his jeans pocket.

"What?" he snaps angrily at whoever it is on the other end of the line. "No." he says, and glances quickly behind us. "Yes. She is."

What? Briefly checking the rear view mirror I can't see anything odd, just a few cars behind us. The Merc is about four cars back and we're all cruising steadily.

"I see." Edward sighs long and hard, pinching the bridge of his nose. I can feel the tension radiating off him.

Something's wrong.

"Yes… I don't know." He glances at me and lowers the phone from his ear. "We're fine. Keep going," he says calmly, smiling at me, but the smile doesn't touch his eyes.

Shit! Adrenaline spikes through my system.

He picks the phone up again.

"Okay on the 520. As soon as we hit it… Yes… I will."

He slots the phone into the speaker cradle, putting it on hands-free.

"What's wrong, Edward?"

"Just look where you're going, baby," he says softly.

I am heading for the on-ramp of the 520 in the direction of Seattle. When I glance at Edward he's staring straight ahead.

"I don't want you to panic, baby," he says calmly. "But as soon as we're on the 520 proper, I want you to really step on the gas. We're being followed."

Chapter 94/7

Followed! My heart into my mouth, pounding, my scalp prickles and my throat constricts with panic. Followed by whom? My eyes dart to the rear view mirror and sure enough the dark car I saw earlier is still behind us. *Fuck! Is that it?* I try and squint through the tinted windshield to see who's driving – but I can see nothing.

"Keep your eyes on the road, baby," Edward says gently, not in the truculent tone he normally uses where my driving is concerned. *Get a grip!* I mentally slap myself and try to subdue the dread that's threatening to swamp me. Supposing whoever's following us is armed? Armed and after Edward! Shit! I feel suddenly nauseous.

"How do we know we're being followed?" My voice is a breathy, squeaky, terrified whisper.

"The Dodge behind us has false licence plates."

How does he know that?

I indicate as we approach the 520 from the on-ramp. It's late afternoon, and although the rain has stopped the roadway is wet. Fortunately the traffic is reasonably light. My Dad's voice echoes around my head from one of his many self-defence lectures. *It's the panic that's gonna kill you or get you seriously hurt, Bells*. I take a deep breath, trying to bring my breathing under control. Whoever is following us is after Edward. As I take another deep steadying breath my mind begins to clear and my stomach settles. I have to keep Edward safe. I wanted to drive this car, and I wanted to drive it fast. Well, here's my chance. I grip the steering wheel tightly and take a final quick glance in my rear view mirror. The Dodge is closing on us. I slow right down, ignoring Edward's sudden panicked glance at me, and time my entrance on to the 520 so that the Dodge has to slow and stop to wait for a gap in the traffic. I drop a gear and floor the gas, and the R8 shoots forward, slamming us both into the backs of our seats. The speedometer needle glides up to 70 mph.

"Steady, baby," Edward says calmly, though I'm sure he's anything but calm inside.

I weave between the two lines of traffic, like a black counter in a game of checkers, effectively jumping the cars and trucks. Jeez, we're so close to the lake on this bridge, it's like we're driving on the water. I studiously ignore the angry disapproving looks from other drivers. Edward clutches his hands together in his lap, keeping as still as possible, and in spite of my fevered thoughts I wonder vaguely if he's doing it in order not to distract me.

"Good girl," he breathes in encouragement. He glances behind him. "I can't see the Dodge."

"We're right behind the unsub, Mr Cullen." Stuart's voice comes through the hands free. "He's trying to catch up with you, sir. We're going to try and come alongside, put ourselves between your car and the Dodge."

Unsub? What does that mean?

"Good. Mrs Cullen is doing well. At this rate, provided the traffic remains light – and from what I can see it is – we'll be off the bridge in a few minutes."

"Sir."

We flash past the bridge control tower, and I know we're half way across Lake Washington. When I check my speed I'm doing 75 mph.

"You're doing really well, Bella," Edward murmurs again as he gazes out of the back of the R8. For a fleeting moment his tone reminds me of our first encounter in his playroom, when he patiently encouraged me through our first scene. The thought is distracting, and I dismiss it immediately.

"Where am I headed?" I ask, moderately calmer, even under these terrifying circumstances. I have the feel of the car now. It's a joy to drive, so quiet and easy to handle it's hard to believe how fast we are going. Driving at this speed in this car… is easy.

"Mrs Cullen, head for I-5 and then south. We want to see if the Dodge follows you all the way," Stuart says over the hands-free. The traffic lights on the bridge are green – thank heavens – and I race onwards.

I glance nervously at Edward, and he smiles reassuringly. Then his face falls.

"Shit!" he swears softly.

There is a line of traffic ahead as we come off the bridge and I have to slow. Glancing anxiously in the mirror once more I think I spot the Dodge.

"Ten or so cars back?"

"Yeah, I see it." Edward says, peering through the narrow rear window. "I wonder who the fuck it is?"

"Me too. Do we know if it's a man driving?" I blurt out towards the cradled BlackBerry.

"No, Mrs Cullen. Could be a man or woman. The tint is too dark."

Edward glances at me.

"A woman?" he says.

I shrug.

"Your Mrs Robinson?" I ask, not taking my eyes off the road.

Edward stiffens and lifts the BlackBerry out of its cradle.

"She's not my Mrs Robinson," he growls. "I haven't spoken to her since my birthday. And Irina wouldn't do this. It's not her style."

"Lauren?"

"She's in Connecticut with her parents. I told you."

"Are you sure?"

He pauses.

"No. But if she'd absconded I'm sure her folks would have let Banner know. Let's discuss this when we're home. Concentrate on what you're doing," he adds, his voice firm.

"But it might just be some random car."

"I'm not taking any risks. Not where you're concerned," he snaps. He replaces the BlackBerry in its cradle, so we're back in contact with our security team. Oh shit. I don't want to rattle Edward right now… later maybe. I hold my tongue.

Fortunately the traffic is thinning a little. I am able to speed over the Mountlake intersection towards the I-5, weaving through the cars again.

"What if we get stopped by the cops?" I ask.

"That would be a good thing."

"Not for my license."

"Don't worry about that," he says. Unexpectedly I hear humor in his voice. I put my foot down again, and hit 75. Boy, this car can move. I love it – she's so easy. I touch 85 mph. I don't think I have ever driven this fast. I was lucky if my truck ever hit 45 mph.

"He's cleared the traffic and picked up speed." Stuart's disembodied voice is calm and informative. "He's doing 90."

Shit! Faster! I press down further on the gas and the car purrs to 95 mph as we approach the I-5 intersection.

"Keep it up, Bella," Edward murmurs. I slow momentarily as we glide onto the I-5.

The interstate is fairly quiet, and I'm able to cross straight over to the fast lane in a split second. As I put my foot down and the glorious R8 zooms forward we tear down the fast lane, lesser mortals pulling over to let us pass. If I wasn't so frightened I might really enjoy this.

"He's hit 100 mph, sir."

"Stay with him, Ethan." Edward barks at Stuart.

Ethan?

A truck lurches into the fast lane – Shit! And I have to slam on the brakes.

"Fucking idiot!" Edward curses the driver as we lurch forward in our seats. I am grateful for our seatbelts.

"Go round him, baby," Edward says through clenched teeth. I check my mirrors and cut right across three lanes. We speed past the slower vehicles and then cut back to the fast lane.

"Nice move, Mrs Cullen," Edward murmurs appreciatively. "Where are the WSP when you need them?"

"I don't want to get stopped by the police, Edward," I mutter, concentrating on the highway ahead. "Have you ever earned a speeding ticket driving this?"

"No," he says, but glancing quickly at him I can see his smirk.

"Have you been stopped?"

"Yes."

"Oh."

"Charm, Mrs Cullen. It all comes down to charm. Now concentrate. Where's the Dodge, Stuart?"

"He's just hit 110, sir. We're about 4 minutes behind you," Stuart says.

Holy *fuck!* My heart leaps once more into my mouth. Can I go any faster? I push my foot down once more, and streak past the traffic.

"Flash the headlights," Edward orders when a Ford Mustang won't move.

"But that would make me an asshole."

"So be an asshole!" he snaps.

Jeez. Okay!

"Um, where are the headlights?"

"The indicator. Pull it towards you."

I do as I'm told and the Mustang moves aside, though not before the driver waves his finger at me in a none-too-complimentary manner. I zoom past him.

"He's the asshole," Edward says under his breath, then barks at me, "Take the 166 exit."

Yes sir!

"We're coming off at the 166." Edward informs Stuart.

"Head straight to Escala, sir."

I slow, check my mirrors, indicate then move with surprising ease across four lanes of the highway and down the off ramp. Merging onto Stewart Street we head south. The street is quiet, with few vehicles. *Where is everyone?*

"We've been damned lucky with the traffic. But that means the Dodge has too. Don't slow up, Bella. Get us home."

"I can't remember the way," I mutter, panicked by the fact the Dodge is still on our tail.

"Head south on Stewart. Keep going until I tell you when." Edward sounds anxious again. I zoom past three blocks but the lights change to yellow on Yale Avenue.

"Run them, Bella," Edward shouts. I jump so hard I floor the gas pedal, throwing us both back in our seats, speeding through the now red light.

"He's taking exit 166," Stuart says.

"Stay with him Ethan."

"Ethan?"

"That's his name." A quick glance and I can see Edward glaring at me as if I'm mad.

"Eyes on the fucking road!"

I ignore his tone.

"Ethan Stuart."

"Yes!" He sounds exasperated.

"Ah." How did I not know this? The man has been following me to work for the last six weeks and I didn't even know his first name.

"That's me, ma'am," Stuart says, startling me, though he's speaking in the calm, monotone voice he always uses. "The unsub is heading down Stewart, sir. He's really picking up speed."

"Go Bella. Less of the fucking chit-chat," Edward growls.

"We're stopped at the first lights on Stewart."

"Bella – quick – in here," Edward shouts, pointing to a parking lot on the south side of Boren Avenue. I turn, the tires screeching in protest as I swerve into the crowded lot.

"Drive round. Quick," Edward orders. I drive as fast I as I can to the back, out of sight of the street. "In there." Edward points to a space. Shit! He wants me to park it. *Crap!*

"Just fucking do it," he says. So I do… perfectly. Probably the only time I have ever parked perfectly.

"We're hidden in the parking lot between Stewart and Boren," Edward says into the BlackBerry.

"Will do, sir." Stuart sounds slightly irritated. "Stay where you are we'll follow the unsub."

Edward turns to me, his eyes searching my face.

"You okay?"

"Sure," I whisper.

Edward smirks.

"Whoever's driving that Dodge can't hear us, you know."

And I laugh.

"We're passing Stewart and Boren now sir. I see the lot. He's gone straight past you, sir."

Both of us sag simultaneously with relief.

"Well done, Mrs Cullen. Good driving." Edward gently strokes my face with his fingertips and I jump at the contact, inhaling deeply. I had no idea I was holding my breath.

"Does this mean you'll stop complaining about my driving?" I ask.

He laughs – a loud cathartic laugh.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that."

"Thank you for letting me drive your car. Under such exciting circumstances, too." I try desperately to keep my voice light.

"Maybe I should drive now."

"To be honest, I don't think I can climb out right now to let you sit here. My legs feel like jello." I can feel myself shuddering and shaking suddenly.

"It's the adrenaline baby," he says softly. "You did amazingly well, as usual. You blow me away, Bella. You never let me down." He touches my cheek softly with the back of his hand, his face full of love, fear, regret – so many emotions at once – and his words are my undoing. Overwhelmed, a strangled sob escapes from my constricting throat, and I start to cry.

"No, baby, no. Please don't cry."

Reaching over he grabs me and, in spite of the limited space we have, pulls me over the handbrake console to cradle me in his lap. Smoothing my hair off my face he kisses my eyes, then my cheeks, and I curl my arms around him and sob quietly into his neck. Oh he smells so good, so comforting. He buries his nose in my hair and wraps me in his arms, holding me tightly and we sit, neither of us saying anything, just holding each other.

Stuart's voice startles us.

"The unsub has slowed outside Escala. He's casing the joint."

"Follow him," Edward snaps.

I wipe my nose on the back of my hand and take a deep steadying breath.

"Use my shirt." Edward kisses my temple.

"Sorry," I mutter, embarrassed by my crying.

"What for? Don't be."

I wipe my nose again. He tips my chin up and plants a gentle kiss on my lips.

"Your lips are so soft when you cry, my beautiful brave girl," he whispers.

"Kiss me again."

Edward stills, one hand on my back, the other on my behind.

"Kiss me," I breathe, and I watch his mouth pop open slightly as he gasps. Leaning across me he takes the BlackBerry out of its cradle and tosses it on to the drivers seat beside my sandaled feet. Then his mouth is on me, as he moves his right hand into my hair, holding me in place, and lifts his left to cradle my face. His tongue invades my mouth, and I welcome it. Our tongues wrestle wildly with each other. Adrenaline turns to lust streaking through my body. I clasp his face, running my fingers over his sideburns, relishing the taste of him. He groans at my fevered response, low and deep in his throat, and my belly tightens swift and hard with carnal desire. His hand moves down my body, brushing my breast, my waist and down to my backside. I shift fractionally.

"Ah!" he says, and breaks away from me, breathless.

"What?" I mutter against his lips.

"Bella, we're in a car lot in Seattle."

"So?"

"Well, right now I want to fuck you, and you're shifting about on me… it's uncomfortable."

My craving spirals out of control at his words, tightening my belly once more.

"Fuck me then," I mutter and kiss the corner of his mouth. Jeez, I want him. Now. Holy fuck, that car-chase was exciting. Too exciting. Terrifying… and the fear has jump-started my libido.

He leans back to gaze at me, his eyes dark and hooded.

"Here?" His voice is husky. My mouth goes dry. How can he turn me on with one word?

"Yes. I want you. Now."

He cocks his head to one side and stares at me for a few moments.

"Mrs Cullen, how very brazen," he whispers, after what feels like an eternity. His hand tightens around my hair at my nape, holding me firmly in place, and his mouth is on mine again, more forcefully this time. His other hand skims down my body, down over my behind and lower still, to my mid thigh… My fingers curl into his over-long hair.

"I'm so glad you're wearing a skirt," he murmurs as he slips his hand beneath my blue and white patterned skirt to caress my thigh. I squirm once more on his lap and the air hisses between his teeth.

"Keep still," he growls. He cups my sex with his hand, and I still immediately. His thumb brushes over my clitoris and my breath catches in my throat as pleasure jolts like electricity deep, deep, deep in my belly.

"Still," he whispers. He kisses me once more as his thumb circles gently around me through the sheer fine lace of my designer panties. Slowly he eases two fingers inside me.

I groan and flex my hips towards his hand.

"Please," I whisper.

"Oh, Mrs Cullen. You're so ready," he says sliding his fingers in and out, tortuously slowly. "Do car-chases turn you on?"

"You turn me on."

He smiles a wolfish grin and withdraws his fingers suddenly, leaving me wanting. He scoops his arm under my knees, and taking me by surprise, he lifts me and swings me round to face the windshield.

"Place your legs either side of mine," he orders, putting his legs together in the middle of the foot-well. I do as I'm told. He runs his hands down my thighs, then back up, pulling up my skirt.

"Hands on my knees, baby, lean forward. Lift that glorious ass in the air. Mind your head."

Shit! We really are going to do this, in a public parking lot. I quickly scan the area in front of us and see no one – but feel a thrill coursing through me. I'm in a public lot! That's so… *hot!* I feel Edward shift beneath me and hear the telltale sound of his zipper. Putting one arm around my waist and with his other hand tugging my lacy panties sideways, he impales me in one swift move.

"Ah!" I groan, grinding down on him, and his breath hisses through his teeth. His arm moves up to my neck and grasps me under my chin. His hand spreads across my neck, pulling me back and tilting my head to one side so he can kiss my throat. His other hand grips my hip and together we start to move.

I push up with my feet, and he tilts himself into me… in and out… the sensation is… I groan loudly. It's so deep this way. My left hand curls around the hand brake, my right hand braced against my door. His teeth graze my earlobe and he tugs – it's almost painful. He bucks again and again into me. I rise and fall, and as we establish a rhythm he moves his hand round beneath my skirt to the apex of my thighs, and his fingers gently tease my clitoris through the sheer finery of my panties.

"Ah!"

"Be. Quick," he breathes into my ear through gritted teeth, his hand still curled around my neck beneath my chin. "We need to do this quick, Bella." And he increases the pressure of his fingers against my sex.

"AH!" I feel the familiar build of pleasure, bunching deep and thick inside me.

"Come on, baby," he breathes at my ear. "I want to hear you."

I moan again… and I am all sensation, my eyes tightly closed. His voice at my ear, his breath on my neck, pleasure radiating out from where his fingers tease my body and where he slams deep inside me – and I am lost. My body takes control, craving my release.

"Yes," Edward hisses in my ear and I open my eyes briefly, staring wildly at the cloth roof of the R8, and I scrunch them closed again as I come around him.

"Oh Bella," he murmurs in awe, and he wraps his arms around me and rams into me one last time and stills as he climaxes deep inside.

He runs his nose along my jaw and softly kisses my throat, my cheek, my temple as a lie on him, my head lolling against his neck.

"Tension relieved, Mrs Cullen?"

Edward closes his teeth around my earlobe again and tugs. My body is drained, totally exhausted, and I mewl. I can feel his smile against me.

"Certainly helped with mine," he adds, shifting me off him. "Lost your voice?"

"Yes," I murmur.

"Well aren't you the wanton creature? I had no idea you were such an exhibitionist."

I sit up immediately, alarmed. He tenses.

"No one's watching are they?" I glance anxiously round the car lot.

"Do you think I'd let anyone watch my wife come?" He strokes his hand down my back reassuringly, but the tone of his voice sends shivers down my spine. I turn to gaze at him and grin impishly.

"Car sex!" I exclaim.

He grins and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear.

"Let's head back. I'll drive."

He opens the side door to let me climb off his lap and out into the parking lot. When I glance down he's quickly doing up his flies. He follows me out, then holds the door open for me to climb back in. Strolling quickly round to the driver's side he climbs in beside me, retrieves the BlackBerry and makes a call.

"Where's Stuart?" he snaps. "…And the Dodge? … How come Stuart's not with you?"

He listens intently, to Ryan I assume.

"Her?" he gasps. "Stick with her." Edward hangs up and gazes at me.

Her! The driver of the car? Who could that be – Irina? Lauren?

"The driver of the Dodge is female?"

"So it would appear," he says quietly. His mouth presses into a thin angry line.

"Let's get you home," he mutters. He starts up the R8 with a roar and reverses smoothly out of the space.

"Where's the, err… unsub? What does that mean by the way? Sounds very BDSM."

Edward smiles briefly as he eases the car out of the lot and back onto Stewart Street.

"It stands for Unknown Subject. Ryan is ex-FBI."

"Ex-FBI?"

"Don't ask." Edward shakes his head. It's obvious he's deep in contemplation.

"Well, where is this female unsub?"

"On the1-5, heading towards Portland."

He glances at me, his eyes grim. Jeez – from passionate, to calm, to anxious, in the space of a few moments. I reach over and caress his thigh, running my fingers leisurely up the inside seam of his jeans, hoping to improve his mood. He takes his hand off the steering wheel and stops the slow ascent of my hand.

"No," he says. "We've made it this far. You don't want me to have an accident three blocks from home." He raises my hand to his lips and plants a cool kiss on my index finger. Cool, calm, authoritative… My Fifty. And for the first time in a while he makes me feel like a wayward child. I withdraw my hand and sit quietly for a moment.

"Female?"

"Apparently so," he sighs.

He turns into the underground garage at Escala, and punches the access code into the security keypad. The gate swings open and he drives on, smoothly parking the R8 in its designated space.

"I really like this car," I murmur.

"Me too. And I really like how you handled it – and how you managed not to break it."

"You can buy me one for my birthday," I smirk at him.

Edward's mouth drops open as I climb out of the car.

"A white one I think," I add leaning down and gazing at him behind the wheel.

He smiles.

"Isabella Cullen, you never cease to amaze me." I shut the door and walk to the end of the car to wait for him. Gracefully he climbs out, gazing at me with that look… that look that calls to something deep inside me. I know this look well. Briefly an image crosses my mind, of the one that passed between Alice and Jasper at lunch. Edward strolls casually towards me, and stands in front of me, not touching me. Leaning down he whispers,

"You like the car. I like the car. I've fucked you in it… perhaps I should fuck you on it."

I gasp.

And a sleek silver BMW pulls into the garage. Edward glances at it anxiously, then relaxes, and smirks down at me.

"But it looks like we have company. Come." He grabs my hand and heads for the garage elevator. He pushes the call button and as we wait the driver of the BMW joins us. He's young, casually dressed, with long layered dark hair. He looks like he works in the media.

"Hi," he says, smiling warmly at us.

Edward puts his arm around me and nods politely.

"I've just moved in. Apartment 32."

"Hello." I return his smile. He has kind, soft blue eyes.

The elevator arrives and we all walk in. Edward glances down at me, his expression unreadable.

"You're Edward Cullen," the young man says.

Edward gives him a tight smile.

"Paul Johnson." He holds out his hand. Reluctantly Edward takes it and shakes. "Which floor?" Paul asks.

"I have to input a code."

"Oh."

"Penthouse."

"Oh." Paul smiles broadly. "Of course."

Paul presses the button for the 16th floor and the doors close.

“Mrs Cullen, I presume.”

“Yes.” I smile politely and we shake hands. Paul flushes slightly as he gazes at me… a fraction too long. *Oh no.* I mirror his flush and Edward’s arm tightens around me.

“When did you move in?” I ask, to be polite.

“Last weekend. I love the place.”

There’s an awkward pause before the elevator stops at Paul’s floor.

“Great to meet you both,” he says, relieved, and steps out. The doors close silently behind him. Edward taps in the entry code and the elevator moves upwards again.

“He seemed nice,” I murmur. “I’ve never met any of the neighbors before.”

Edward scowls.

“I prefer it that way.”

“That’s because you’re a hermit. I thought he was pleasant enough.”

“A hermit?”

“Hermit. Stuck in your ivory tower.” I state matter-of-factly.

Edward’s lips twitch with amusement.

“Our ivory tower. And I think you have another name to add to the list of your admirers, Mrs Cullen.”

I roll my eyes.

“Edward, you think everyone is an admirer.”

“Did you just roll your eyes at me?”

My pulse quickens.

“I sure did,” I whisper, my breath catching in my throat.

He cocks his head to one side, wearing his smouldering, arrogant, amused expression.

“What shall we do about that?”

“Something rough.”

He blinks to hide his surprise.

“Rough?”

“Please.”

“You want more?”

I nod slowly.

The doors to the elevator open and we’re home.

“How rough?” he breathes, his eyes darkening.

I gaze at him, saying nothing. He closes his eyes for a moment, and then grabs my hand and hauls me into the foyer.

When we burst through the double doors Stuart is standing in the hallway, looking expectantly at the pair of us.

“Stuart, I’d like to be debriefed in an hour,” Edward says.

“Yes sir.”

Turning Stuart heads back into Taylor’s office.

We have an hour!

Edward glances down at me.

“Rough?”

I nod.

“Well, Mrs Cullen, you’re in luck. I’m taking requests today.”

Chapter 95/8

"Do you have anything in mind?" Edward murmurs, pinning me with a bold green gaze. I shrug, flushing, and I don't know if it's the chase, the adrenaline, my earlier bad mood – I don't really understand, but I want this… badly. I watch a puzzled expression flit briefly across Edward's face.

"Kinky fuckery?" he asks softly.

I nod, feeling my face flame. Why am I embarrassed by this? I have done all manner of kinky fuckery with this man. He's my husband, damn it! Am I embarrassed because I want this and I'm ashamed to admit it? My subconscious glares at me… stop over-thinking.

"Carte blanche?" He whispers the question, eyeing me speculatively. It feels like he's trying to read my mind.

Carte blanche? Holy Fuck – what will that entail?

"Yes," I murmur nervously, aware that I am biting my lower lip. He smiles a slow sexy smile.

"Come," he says and tugs me towards the stairs. His intention is clear.

Playroom! My inner goddess wakes from her post-R8-sex slumber, wide-eyed and raring to go.

At the top of the stairs he releases my hand and unlocks the playroom door. The key is on the Yes Seattle key chain that I gave him not so long ago.

"After you, Mrs Cullen," he says softly, and swings the door open.

The playroom smells familiar, of leather and wood and fresh polish. I flush to think that Mrs Cope must have been in here cleaning while we have been away. As we enter Edward switches on the lights and the dark red walls are illuminated with soft, diffused light. I stand gazing at him, anticipation running thick and heavy through my veins. What is he going to do to me? He locks the door and turns. Cocking his head to one side he regards me thoughtfully, then shakes his head, slightly amused.

"What do you want, Isabella?" he asks gently.

"You." My response is breathy.

He smirks.

"You've got me. You've had me since you fell into my office, Mrs Cullen."

"Surprise me then, Mr Cullen."

His mouth twists slightly with repressed humor and carnal promise.

"As you wish, Mrs Cullen." He folds his arms and raises one long index finger to his lips while he appraises me. "I think we'll start by ridding you of your clothes." He steps forward. Grasping the front of my short denim jacket he opens it and pushes it over my shoulders so it falls to the floor. He grasps the hem of my black camisole.

"Lift your arms."

I obey, and he peels it off over my head. Leaning down he plants a soft kiss on my lips, his green eyes glowing with an alluring mix of lust and love. The camisole joins my jacket on the floor.

"Here," I whisper nervously, removing the hair tie from round my wrist. I hold it up for him. He stills, and his eyes widen, gazing inscrutably at me. Finally he takes the small band.

"Turn round," he orders softly.

Relieved, I smile to myself and oblige immediately. Looks like we've overcome that little hurdle. He gathers my hair, and braids it quickly and efficiently before fastening it with the tie. He tugs the braid slightly, pulling my head back.

"Good thinking, Mrs Cullen," he breathes in my ear, then nips my earlobe. "Now turn round and take your skirt off. Let it fall to the floor." He releases me and steps back, and I turn to face him. Not taking my eyes off his, I slowly unbutton the waistband of my skirt and ease the zipper down. The full skirt fans out and falls to the floor, pooling at my feet.

"Step out from your skirt," he murmurs. As I step towards him he kneels swiftly down in front of me and grasps my right ankle. Deftly he unbuckles my sandals one at a time while I lean forward, balancing myself with a hand on the wall, under the pegs that used to hold all his whips, crops and paddles. The flogger and the riding crop are the only implements that remain. I eye them with curiosity. *Will he use those?* Having removed my shoes Edward sits back on his heels gazing up at me.

"You are fine sight, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs, as I stand staring back at him dressed only in my lacy bra and panties. Suddenly he kneels up, grabs my hips and pulls me forward, burying his nose at the apex of my thighs.

"And you smell of me and you and sex," he breathes, inhaling sharply. "It's intoxicating." He kisses me through my lace panties, while I flush, and gasp at his words – my insides liquefying. He's just so… naughty. Gathering up my clothes and sandals, he stands in one swift graceful move, like an athlete.

"Go and stand beside the table," he says calmly, pointing with his chin. Turning he strides over to the museum chest of wonder.

What is he going to do to me? He glances back and smirks at me.

"Turn round, face the wall," he admonishes. "That way you won't know what I'm planning. We aim to please, Mrs Cullen, and you wanted a surprise."

I face the wall, listening, my ears suddenly sensitive to the slightest sound. He's good at this – building my expectations, stoking my desire… making me wait. I hear him put my shoes on the floor and, I think, my clothes on the chest… followed by the telltale clatter of his shoes as they drop to the floor, one at a time. Hmmm… love barefoot Edward. A moment later I hear him pull open a drawer.

Toys! What the hell is he going to do? Oh I love, love, love this anticipation. The drawer closes and my breathing spikes. How can the sound of a drawer render me a quivering mess… it makes no sense. The subtle hiss of the sound system coming to life tells me it's going to be a musical interlude. A lone piano starts, muted and soft, and mournful chords fill the room. It's not a tune I know. The piano is joined by an electric guitar. *What is this?*

A man's voice speaks and I can just make out the words.

And I am not frightened of dying.

Edward pads leisurely towards me, his bare feet slapping softly on the wooden floor. I can sense him behind me, as a woman starts to sing… wail… sing…?

"Rough, you say, Mrs Cullen?" he breathes at my left ear.

"Hmmm."

"You must tell me to stop if it's too much. If you say stop, I will stop immediately. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"I need your promise."

I inhale sharply. *Shit, what is he going to do?*

"I promise," I murmur, recalling his words from earlier: *I don't want to hurt you, but I'm more than happy to play.*

"Good girl." Leaning down he plants a kiss on my naked shoulder. "I think we'll keep this on, for now." He hooks a finger beneath my bra strap and traces a line across my back beneath the strap. I want to moan. How does he make the slightest touch so erotic? He removes his finger, then hooks both of his thumbs into my panties, and slides them down my legs.

"Step," he orders. Once more I do as I'm told, stepping out of my panties. He plants a kiss on my backside and stands.

"I am going to blindfold you so that everything will be more intense." He slips an airline eye-mask over my eyes, and my world is plunged into the darkness. The woman singing moans incoherently… a haunting, heartfelt melody.

"Bend down and lie flat on the table." His words are softly spoken. "Now."

Without hesitation I bend over the side of the table and rest my torso on the highly polished wood, my face flush against the hard surface. It's cool against my skin and it smells vaguely of beeswax, with a citrus tang.

"Stretch your arms up and hold on to the edge."

Okay… Reaching forward I clutch the far edge of the table. It's quite wide, so my arms are fully extended.

"If you let go, I will spank you. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to spank you, Isabella?"

Everything south of my waist tightens deliciously. I realise I've wanted this since he threatened me during lunch, and neither the car chase nor our subsequent intimate encounter has sated this need.

"Yes." My voice is a hoarse whisper.

"Why?" he breathes.

Oh… do I have to have a reason? *Jeez.* I shrug.

"Tell me," he coaxes.

"Um…"

And from out of nowhere he smacks me hard.

"Ah!" I cry out.

"Hush now."

He gently rubs my behind where he's hit me. Then he leans over me, his hips pressing into my backside, plants a kiss between my shoulder blades and trails kisses across my back. He's taken his shirt off, so his chest hair tickles my back, and I can feel his erection against me through the rough fabric of his jeans.

"Open your legs," he murmurs.

I move my legs apart.

"Wider."

I groan and spread my legs wider immediately.

"Good girl," he breathes. He traces his finger down my back, along the crack between my buttocks, and over my anus, which shrinks instinctively at his touch.

"We're going to have with some fun with this," he whispers.

What? Fuck!

His finger continues down over my perineum and slowly slides into me.

"I see you're very wet, Isabella. From earlier, or from now?"

I groan and he eases his finger in and out of me, over and over. I push back on his hand, relishing the intrusion.

"Oh Bella, I think it's both. I think you love being here, like this. Mine."

I do – oh I do.

He withdraws his finger and smacks me hard once more.

"Tell me," he whispers, his voice hoarse and urgent.

"Yes, I do," I whimper.

He smacks me once more, then sticks two fingers inside me. He withdraws them immediately, spreading the moisture up over and around my anus.

"What are you going to do?" I ask, breathless.

Oh My… is he going to fuck my ass?

"It's not what you think," he murmurs reassuringly. "I told you, one step at time with this, baby." I hear the quiet spurt of some liquid, presumably from a tube, then his fingers are massaging me *there* again. Making me wet…*there!* I squirm… my fear colliding with my excitement of the unknown. He smacks me once more, lower, so he hits my sex. I groan. It feels… so good.

"Keep still," he says. "And don't let go."

"Ah…"

"This is lube."

He spreads some more on me. I try not to wriggle beneath him, but my heart is pounding, my pulse haywire, as desire and anxiety pump through me.

"I have wanted to do this to you for some time now, Bella."

I groan. And I feel something cool, metallically cool, run down my spine.

"I have a small present for you here," Edward whispers.

What is it? An image from our show-and-tell springs immediately to mind. *Holy cow*. A butt plug. Edward runs it down the parting between my buttocks.

Oh My.
"I am going to push this inside you, very slowly."

I gasp… anticipation and anxiety charging through me.

"Will it hurt?"

"No baby. It's small. Once it's inside you, I'm going to fuck you real hard."

I practically convulse. Bending over me he kisses me once more between my shoulder blades.

"Ready?" he whispers.

Ready? Am I ready for this?

"Yes," I mutter quietly, my mouth dry. He runs another finger down from my ass and slips it inside me. Fuck, it's his thumb. He cups my sex and his fingers gently caress my clitoris. I moan… it's heavenly. And gently, while his fingers and thumb work their magic, he pushes the cold plug slowly into me.

"Ah!" I groan loudly at the unfamiliar sensation, my muscles protesting at the intrusion. He circles his thumb inside me and pushes the plug harder, and it slips in easily, and I don't know if it's because I'm so turned on or if he's distracted me with his expert fingers, but my body seems to accept it. It's heavy… and strange… *there!*

"Oh baby," he breathes.

And I can feel it… where his thumb swirls inside me… and the plug presses against … oh ah…

He slowly twists the plug, eliciting a long drawn-out moan from me.

"Edward" I mumble, his name a garbled mantra, as I adjust to the sensation.

"Good girl," he breathes. He runs his free hand down my side until it reaches my hip. Slowly he withdraws his thumb and I hear the telltale sound of his zipper opening. Grasping my other hip he pulls me back and parts my legs further, his foot pushing against mine.

"Don't let go of the table, Bella," he warns.

"No," I gasp.

"Something rough? Tell me if I'm too rough. Understand?"

"Yes," I whisper, and he slams into me and pulls me onto him at the same time, jolting the plug forward, deeper…

"Fuck!" I cry out.

He stills, his breathing harsher, and my panting matches his. I try to assimilate all the sensations: the delicious fullness, the tantalizing feeling that I am doing something forbidden, the erotic pleasure that spirals outward from deep within me. He pulls slightly on the plug.

Oh jeez… I moan, and I hear his sharp intake of breath – a gasp of pure, unadulterated pleasure. It heats my blood. Have I ever felt so wanton… so…

"Again?" he whispers.

"Yes."

"Stay flat," he orders. He eases out of me and rams into me again.

Oh… I wanted this.

"Yes," I hiss.

And he picks up the pace, his breathing more labored, matching my own as he thrashes into me.

"Oh Bella," he gasps. He moves one of his hands from my hips and twists the plug again, tugging at it slightly, pulling it out and pushing it back in. The feeling is indescribable and I think I am going to pass out on the table. And he never misses a beat as he takes me, again and again, moving strong and hard inside me. I can feel my insides tightening and quivering…

"Oh fuck," I moan. This is going to rip me apart.

"Yes, baby," he hisses.

"Please," I beg him and I don't know what for – to stop, to never stop, to twist the plug again. I can feel myself tightening around him and the plug…

"That's right," he breathes, and he slaps me hard on my right buttock, and I come… again and again, falling, falling, spinning, pulsing round and round… and Edward gently pulls the plug out.

"FUCK!" I scream and Edward grabs my hips and climaxes loudly, holding me still.

-

The woman is still singing. Edward always puts songs on repeat in here… strange. I am curled in his arms, in his lap, my head resting against his chest. We're on the floor of the playroom, by the table.

"Welcome back," he says, peeling the blindfold off me. I blink as my eyes adjust to the muted light. Tipping my chin back he plants a soft kiss on my lips, his eyes focused on and anxiously searching mine. I reach up to caress his face. He smiles.

"Well, did I fulfill the brief?" he asks, amused.

I frown.

"Brief?"

"You wanted rough," he says gently.

I grin, because I just can't help it.

"Don't tell me you have performance anxiety, Edward."

He raises his eyebrows and grins back at me.

"No, Mrs Cullen, I do not have performance anxiety. Well, not right now. You look thoroughly well-fucked and beautiful at this moment." He caresses my face, his long fingers stroking my cheek.

"I feel it," I purr.

He reaches down and kisses me tenderly, his lips soft and warm and giving against mine.

"You never disappoint," he murmurs. He leans back to gaze down at me. "How do you feel?" He can't hide the concern in his voice.

"Good," I murmur, feeling a flush creep across my face. "Thoroughly well-fucked." I smile shyly.

" Why Mrs Cullen, you have a dirty, dirty mouth. I'm shocked, shocked I tell you." Edward feigns an offended expression but I can hear his amusement.

"That's because I'm married to a dirty, dirty boy, Mr Cullen."

He grins a ridiculously stupid grin and it's infectious.

"I'm glad you're married to him." He gently takes hold of my braid, lifts it to his lips and kisses the end softly, his eyes green and glowing with love. Oh my… did I ever have a chance of resisting this man? I reach for his left hand and plant a kiss on his wedding ring, a plain platinum band matching my own.

"Mine," I whisper.

"Yours," he responds. He curls his arms around me tightly and presses his nose into my hair. "Shall I run you a bath?"

"Hmmm. Only if you join me in it."

"Okay," he says. He sets me onto my feet and stands up beside me. He's still wearing his jeans.

"Will you wear your… err… other jeans?"

He frowns down at me.

"Other jeans?"

"The ones you used to wear in here."

He blinks down at me.

"Those jeans?" he murmurs with perplexed surprise.

"You look very hot in them."

"Do I?"

"Yeah… I mean, really hot."

He smiles, shyly.

"Well… for you, Mrs Cullen, maybe I will." He bends to kiss me, then grabs the small bowl on the table that contains the butt plug, the tube of lubricant, the blindfold and my panties.

"Who cleans these toys?" I ask as I follow him over to the chest.

He frowns at me, as if not understanding the question.

"Me. Mrs Cope."

"What?"

He nods, amused… and embarrassed, I think. He switches off the music.

"Well – um…"

"Your subs used to do it?" I finish his sentence. He gives me an apologetic shrug.

"Here." He hands me his shirt and I put it on, wrapping it around myself. It smells of him, and my chagrin at butt-plug-washing is forgotten. He leaves the items on the chest. Taking my hand, he unlocks the playroom door then leads me out and downstairs. I follow him

meekly. The anxiety, the bad mood, the thrill, fear and excitement of the car chase have all gone. I feel beyond relaxed – finally sated and calm. As we enter our ensuite I yawn loudly and stretch… so at ease with myself for a change.

"What is it?" Edward asks as he turns on the faucet.

I shake my head.

"Tell me," he asks softly. He spills jasmine bath oil into the running water, filling the room with its sweet, sensual scent.

I flush slightly.

"I just feel better."

He smiles.

"Yes, you've been in a strange mood today, Mrs Cullen." Standing he pulls me into his arms. "I know you're worrying about these recent events. I'm sorry you're caught up in them. I don't know if it's a vendetta, an ex-employee, or a business rival. If anything were to happen to you because of me…" His voice drops to a pained whisper. I curl my arms around him.

"What if something happens to you, Edward?" I finally voice my fear. He gazes down at me.

"We'll figure this out. Now let's get you out of this shirt and into this bath."

"Shouldn't you talk to Stuart?"

"He can wait," his mouth hardens and for a moment I feel a sudden pang of pity for Stuart. What's he done to upset Edward?

Edward helps me out of his shirt, unhooks my bra and slips it off. He frowns as I turn to him. My breasts still bear faded bruises from the love bites he gave me during our honeymoon. But I decide not to tease him about them.

"I wonder if Ryan has caught up with the Dodge?" I muse.

"We'll see, after this bath. Get in." He holds his hand out for me. I climb into the hot, fragrant water and sit tentatively.

"Ow." My ass is tender, and the hot water makes me wince.

"Easy, baby," Edward warns, but as he says it the uncomfortable sensation melts away.

Edwards strips and climbs in behind me, pulling me against his chest. I nestle between his legs and we lie idle and content in the hot water. I run my fingers down his legs and he twirls my braid between his fingers.

"We need to go over the plans for the new house. Later this evening?"

"Sure." That woman is coming back again. My subconscious gazes up from Volume 3 of The Collected Works of Charles Dickens and glowers. I'm with my subconscious. I sigh… unfortunately Tanya Denali's designs are breathtaking.

"I must get my things ready for work," I whisper.

He stills.

"You know you don't have to go back to work," he murmurs.

Oh no… not this again.

"Edward, we've been through this. Please don't resurrect that argument."

He tugs my braid so my face tilts up and back.

"Just saying…" He plants a soft kiss on my lips.

~o~

I pull on sweats and a vest and decide to go fetch my clothes from the playroom. As I make my way across the hallway I hear Edward's raised voice from his study. I freeze.

"Where the fuck were you?"

Oh shit. He's shouting at Stuart. Cringing inwardly I dash upstairs to the playroom. I really don't want to hear what he has to say to him – I still find shouty Edward intimidating. Poor Stuart. At least I get to shout back.

I gather up my clothes and Edward's shoes, then notice the small porcelain bowl with the butt plug still on top of the museum chest. *Well… I suppose I should clean it.* I add it to the pile and make my way back downstairs. I glance nervously through the great room, but all is quiet… thank heavens. Taylor will be back tomorrow evening, and Edward is generally calmer when he's around. Taylor is spending some quality time today and tomorrow with his daughter. I wonder idly if I'll ever get to meet her.

Mrs Cope comes out of the utility room. We startle each other.

"Mrs Cullen – I didn't see you there." *Oh, I'm Mrs Cullen now!*

"Hello, Mrs Cope."

"Welcome home." She beams at me.

"Please call me Bella."

"Mrs Cullen, I wouldn't feel comfortable doing that."

Why must everything change, just because I have a ring on my finger?

"Would you like to run through the menus for the week?" she asks, looking at me expectantly.

Menus?

"Um…" This is not a question I have ever anticipated being asked.

She smiles.

"When I first worked for Mr Cullen, every Sunday evening I would run through the week's menus with him, and list anything he might need from the grocery store."

"I see."

"Shall I take those for you?"

She holds out her hands for my clothes.

"Oh…um. Actually I haven't finished with these." *And they are hiding the bowl with the butt plug in!* I can feel myself blush crimson. It's a wonder I can look Mrs Cope in the face. She knows what we do – she cleans the room. Jeez, will I ever get used to this?

"When you're ready, Mrs Cullen. I'd be more than happy to run through things with you."

"Thank you," I breathe. We are interrupted by an ashen-faced Stuart who stalks out of Edward's study and briskly crosses the great room. He gives us both a brief nod, not looking either of us in the eye, and slinks into Taylor's study. I am grateful for his intervention, as I don't wish to discuss menus or butt plugs with Mrs Cope right now. Offering her a brief smile I scuttle back to the bedroom. Will I ever get used to having domestic staff at my beck and call? I shake my head… one day, maybe.

I dump Edward's shoes on the floor and my clothes on the bed, and take the bowl with the butt plug into the bathroom. I eye it suspiciously. It looks innocuous enough, and surprisingly clean. I don't want to dwell on that, and I wash it quickly with soap and water. Will that be enough? I'll have to ask Mr Sexpert if it should be sterilized or something. I shudder at the thought.

~o~

I like that Edward has turned over the library to me. It now houses an attractive white wooden desk I can work at. I put the four manuscripts I read on honeymoon into my briefcase and check my desk. Yep, I have everything I need. Part of me dreads going back to work, but I can never tell Edward that – he'd seize the opportunity to make me quit. My husband is everyone's boss, even mine. I remember Roach's apoplectic reaction when I told him… and how, shortly afterwards, my position was confirmed. I realise now it was because of whom I was marrying, and the thought is unwelcome. But I am no longer Acting Commissioning Editor – I am Isabella Swan, Commissioning Editor.

I haven't yet plucked up the courage to tell Edward that I am not going to change my name at work. I think my reasons are solid – I need some distance from him – but I know there will be a row when he finally realizes that. Guess I shall face it then.

Sitting back in my chair I start my final chore of the day. My laptop says it's seven in the evening. Edward still hasn't emerged from his study, so I have time. Taking the memory card out of the Nikon camera I load it into the laptop to transfer the photographs. As the pictures upload I reflect on the day. Is Ryan back? Or is still on his way to Portland? Has he caught up with the mystery woman? Has Edward heard from him? I want some answers. I don't care that he's busy, I want to know what's going on, and I suddenly feel a tad resentful that he's keeping me in the dark. I rise, intending to go and confront him in his study, but as I do the photos taken on the last few days of our honeymoon pop up onscreen.

Holy crap!

Picture after picture of me. Asleep, so many of me asleep, my hair over my face or fanned out across the pillow, lips parted… shit – sucking my thumb. I haven't sucked my thumb for years! So many photos… I had no idea he'd taken these. There are a few candid long shots, including one of me leaning over the rail of the yacht, staring moodily into the distance. How did I not notice him taking this? I smile at the photos of me curled up and laughing – my hair flying as I struggle, fighting his tickling tormenting fingers. And there's the one of him and me on the bed in the master cabin that he took at arm's length. I am cuddled on his chest and he gazes at the camera, young, wide-eyed… in love. His other hand cups my head and I am smiling like a love-struck fool… but it's Edward I cannot take my eyes off. *Oh my.* My beautiful man, his ruffled just-fucked hair, his green eyes glowing, his lips… My beautiful man who cannot bear to be tickled, who could not

bear to be touched just a short while ago… yet now he tolerates my touch. I must ask him if he likes it, or whether he lets me touch him for my pleasure rather than his.

I frown, gazing down at his image, suddenly overwhelmed by my feelings for this man. Someone out there wants to harm him – first Echo Charlie, then the fire at CEH, and that damned car chase… I gasp, putting my hand to my mouth as an involuntary sob escapes. Abandoning my computer I leap up to find Edward – not to confront him now, just to check that he's safe.

Not bothering to knock I barge in to his study. Edward is at his desk, on the phone. He looks up in surprised annoyance but the irritation on his face disappears when he sees it's me.

"So you can't enhance it further?" he says down the phone, though he doesn't take his eyes off me. Without hesitation I walk round his desk and he turns in his chair to face me, frowning up. I can tell he's thinking, *what does she want?* When I crawl onto his lap his eyebrows shoot up in surprise. I put my arms around his neck and cuddle into him. Gingerly he puts his arm around me.

"Um… yes, Barney. Could you hold one moment?" He cups the phone against his shoulder.

"Bella, what's wrong?"

I shake my head. Tipping my chin up he gazes into my eyes. I pull my head free from his hold, tuck it beneath his chin and curl up smaller on his lap. He smells heavenly… so comforting. He wraps his free arm more tightly around me and kisses the top of my head. I can tell he's bemused.

"Ok Barney, what were you saying?" he continues. Wedging the phone between his ear and his shoulder he taps a key on his laptop. A grainy black and white CCTV image appears on the screen… a man with dark hair, in pale coveralls. Edward presses another key, and the man walks towards the camera, but with his head bowed. When the man is closer to the camera Edward freezes the frame. He's standing in a bright white room with what looks like a long line of tall black cabinets to his left. This must be CEH's server room.

"Okay Barney, one more time."

The screen springs to life. A box appears around the head of the man in the CCTV footage and suddenly we zoom in. I sit up, fascinated.

"Is Barney doing this?" I ask quietly.

"Yes," Edward answers. "Can you sharpen the picture at all?" he continues down the phone to Barney.

The picture blurs, then refocuses, moderately sharper. The man is consciously gazing down, avoiding the CCTV camera. As I stare at him a chill sweeps over me. There is something familiar in the line of his jaw… or something. He has scruffy short black hair that looks odd and ill kempt… and in the newly sharpened picture I can see he's wearing an earring, a small hoop. Holy crap! *I know who it is.*

"Edward," I breathe. "That's James Smith."

Chapter 96/9

"You think?" Edward asks, surprised.

I nod.

"It's the line of his jaw." I point at the screen. "And the earrings, and the shape of his shoulders. He's the right build too. He must be wearing a wig – or he's cut and dyed his hair."

"Barney, are you getting this?" Edward puts the phone down on his desk and switches to hands-free. "You seem to have studied him in some detail, Mrs Cullen," Edward whispers for my benefit. I scowl at him, but I'm saved by Barney.

"Yes, sir. I heard Mrs Cullen. I'm now running face recognition software on all the digitized CCTV footage. See where else this asshole – I'm sorry, this man – has been within the organization."

I glance nervously at Edward, who ignores Barney's expletive. He's studying the CCTV picture closely.

"Why would he do this?" I ask Edward.

"Revenge, perhaps. I don't know. Some people, you can't fathom why they behave the way they do. I'm just angry that you ever worked so closely with him." Edward's mouth presses into a hard, thin line and his arm encircles my waist protectively.

"We have the contents of his hard drive too sir," Barney interjects.

What?

"Yes, I remember. Do you have an address for Mr Smith?" he barks at Barney.

"Yes sir, I do."

"Alert Jenks."

"Sure will. I'm also going to scan the city CCTV, and see if I can track his movements."

"Check what vehicle he owns."

"Sir."

"Barney can do all this?" I whisper.

Edward grins at me.

"What was on his hard drive?" I whisper.

Edward's face hardens and he shakes his head.

"Nothing much," he says, tight-lipped.

"Tell me."

"No."

"Was it about you, or me?"

"Me," he sighs.

"What sort of things? About your lifestyle?"

Edward shakes his head and puts his index finger against my lips to silence me.

I scowl at him. But his eyes narrow, two sharp emeralds, and it's such a clear warning that I stop.

"It's a 2006 Camaro. I'll send the license details to Jenks too," Barney squawks excitedly from the phone.

"Good. Let me know where else that fucker has been in my building. And check this image against the one from his SIP personnel file." Edward gazes at me skeptically. "I want to be sure we have a match."

"Already across that sir, and Mrs Cullen is correct. This is James Smith."

I grin at Edward. *See?* I can be useful. Edward rubs his hand down my back.

"Well done, Mrs Cullen," he smiles at me, his earlier rancor forgotten. He says to Barney, "Let me know when you've tracked all his movements at HQ. Also check out any other CEH property he may have had access to, and let the security teams know, so they can make another sweep of all those buildings."

"Sir."

"Thanks Barney." Edward hangs up.

"Well, Mrs Cullen, it seems that you are not only decorative, but useful too." Edward's eyes light up with wicked amusement. I know he's teasing.

"Decorative?" I scoff, teasing him back.

"Very," he says softly, and he kisses me lightly.

"You're much more decorative than I am, Mr Cullen," I smile against his lips. He grins and kisses me more forcefully, winding my braid around his wrist and wrapping his arms around me tightly. When we come up for air we are both breathless.

"Hungry?" he asks.

"No."

"I am."

"What for?"

He blinks down at me.

"Well – food actually, Mrs Cullen."

"I'll make you something," I giggle.

"I love that sound."

"Of me offering you food?"

"You giggling." He kisses my hair. I hug him once more, then shift and stand.

"So what would you like to eat, sir?" I ask sweetly.

He narrows his eyes at me.

"Are you being cute, Mrs Cullen?"

"Always, Mr Cullen… sir."

He smiles a sphinx-like smile.

"I can still put you over my knee," he murmurs seductively.

"I know." I grin down at him. Putting my hands on the arms of his office chair I lean down and kiss him. "That's one of the things I like about you. But stow your twitching palm – you're hungry," I breathe.

He smiles his shy smile and my heart clenches.

"Oh Mrs Cullen, what am I going to do with you?"

"You're going to answer my question. What would like to eat?"

"Something light. Surprise me," he says, and I flush slightly, remembering my words in the playroom earlier.

"I'll see what I can do."

I sashay out of his study and into the kitchen. My heart sinks slightly when I see Mrs Cope is there.

"Hello, Mrs Cope."

"Mrs Cullen. Are you ready for something to eat?"

"Um…"

She is stirring something in a pot on the stove that smells delicious.

"I was going to make subs for Mr Cullen and me."

She blinks, and pauses for a heartbeat.

"Sure," she says. "Mr Cullen likes French bread – there is some in the freezer cut to sub length. I'd be happy to make it for you, ma'am."

"I know. But I'd like to do this."

"I understand. I'll give you some room."

"What are you cooking?"

"This a bolognaise sauce. It can be eaten anytime. I'll freeze it." She smiles warmly at me and turns the heat right down.

"Um – so what does Edward like in a, um… sub?" I frown, struck by the connotation of what I've just said. Does Mrs Cope understand the inference?

"Mrs Cullen, you could put just about anything in a sandwich, and as long as it's in French bread he'll eat it." She grins at me and I grin back at her.

"Okay, thank you." I skip to the fridge. In the freezer compartment I find the French bread cut to size in zip-lock bags. Taking out two I place them on a plate, pop them into the microwave and set it to defrost.

Mrs Cope has disappeared. I frown as I return to the fridge to search for ingredients. I suppose it will be down to me to set the parameters by which Mrs Cope and I will work together. I like the idea of cooking for myself and Edward at the weekends… Mrs Cope is more than welcome to do it during the week – the last thing I'll want to do when I come home from work is cook. Hmmm… a bit like Edward's routine with his submissives. I shake my head. I mustn't over-think this. I find some ham in the fridge, and in the salad chiller a perfectly ripe avocado.

Edward emerges from his study as I am adding a touch of salt and lemon to the mashed avocado, the plans for the new house in his hands. He puts them on the breakfast bar, walks round and wraps his arms around me, kissing my neck.

"Barefoot and in the kitchen," he murmurs.

"Shouldn't that be barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen?" I smirk.

He stills, his whole body tensing against me.

"Not yet," he breathes, and I can hear the apprehension in his voice.

"No," I agree, horrified. "Not yet!"

He relaxes.

"On that we can agree, Mrs Cullen."

"You do want kids though, don't you?" I ask, suddenly nervous.

"Eventually, sure, yes. But I'm not ready to share you yet." He kisses my neck again.

Oh… *share?*

"What are you making? Smells good," he adds, kissing me behind my ear. I know it's to distract me. I shiver as a delicious tingle travels down my spine.

"Subs." I smirk, recovering my sense of humor. I can feel his smile against my neck.

“My favorite,” he teases, nipping my earlobe.

I poke him with my elbow.

“Mrs Cullen, you wound me.” He clutches his side.

“Wimp,” I mutter disapprovingly.

“Wimp?” he gasps in disbelief.

He slaps my behind, making me yelp.

“Hurry up with my food, wench. And later I’ll show you how wimpy I can be.” He slaps me playfully once more and goes to the fridge.

“Would you like a glass of wine?” he asks.

“Please.”

~o~

Edward spreads the architectural plans out over the breakfast bar. Tanya really has some spectacular ideas.

“I love her proposal to make the whole of the downstairs back wall glass, but…”

“What?” Edward says.

I sigh.

“But I don’t want to take all the old world character out of the house.”

He blinks at me.

“Character?”

“Yes. What Tanya is proposing is quite radical, but… well… I fell in love with the house as it was… warts and all.”

Edward’s brow furrows, as if this is anathema to him.

“I kind of like it the way it is,” I whisper. Is this going to make him mad?

He regards me steadily.

"I want this house to be the way you want," he says simply. "Whatever you want. It's yours."

Oh my…

"I want you to like it too. To be happy in it too."

"I'll be happy wherever you are. It's that simple, Bella."

His green gaze holds mine. He is utterly, utterly sincere. I blink at him as my heart expands… Holy cow – he really does love me.

"Well," I swallow, fighting the small knot of emotion that catches in my throat. "I like the glass wall. Maybe we could ask her to incorporate it into the house a little more sympathetically."

Edward grins.

"Sure. Whatever you want. What about the plans for upstairs and the basement?"

"I'm cool with those."

"Good."

Okay… now the million-dollar question. I steel myself to ask.

"Do you want to put in a playroom?" I feel the oh-so-familiar flush creeping up my face as I ask. Edward's eyebrows shoot up.

"Do you?" he replies, surprised and amused at once.

I shrug.

"Um… if you want."

He regards me for a moment.

"Let's leave our options open for the moment. After all, this will be a family home."

I can't help the slight stab of disappointment I feel. I guess he's right… although when are we going to have a family? It could be years.

"Besides, we can improvise." He smirks at me.

“I like improvising,” I whisper.

He grins.

“There’s something I want to discuss.” Edward points to the master bedroom and we start a detailed discussion on bathrooms and separate walk-in closets.

~o~

When we finish it’s 9.30 in the evening.

“Are you going back to work?” I ask as Edward rolls up the plans.

“Not if you don’t want me to.” He smiles. “What would you like to do?”

“We could watch TV,” I suggest. I don’t want to read, and I don’t want to go to bed… yet.

“Okay,” Edward agrees willingly, and I follow him into the TV room.

We have sat here three, maybe four times, and Edward usually reads a book. He’s not interested in television at all. I curl up beside him on the couch, tucking my legs beneath me and resting my head against his shoulder. He switches on the flat screen with the remote and flicks mindlessly through the channels.

“Any specific drivel you want to see?”

“You don’t like TV much, do you?” I mutter sardonically.

He shakes his head.

“Waste of time,” he mumbles. “But I’ll sit and watch something with you.”

“I thought we could make out.”

His face whips to mine.

“Make out?” he gasps, gazing at me as if I’ve grown two heads. He stops the endless flicking, leaving the TV on an over-lit Spanish soap opera.

“Yes.” *Why is he so horrified?*

“We could go to bed and make out.”

"We do that all the time. When was the last time you made out in front of the TV?" I ask, shy and teasing at the same time. He blinks at me, then shrugs and shakes his head. Pressing the remote again he flicks through another few channels before settling on an old episode of the X Files.

"Edward?"

"I've never done that," he says quietly.

Oh!

"Never?"

"No."

"Not even with Mrs Robinson?"

He snorts.

"Baby, I did a lot of things with Mrs Robinson. Making out was not one of them," he smirks at me. Then his eyes narrow with amused curiosity.

"Have you?" he asks.

I flush.

"Of course."

"What? Who with?"

Oh no… I do not want to have this discussion.

"Tell me," he persists.

I gaze down at my knotted fingers. He gently covers my hands with one of his. When I glance up at him he's smiling at me.

"I want to know. So I can go and beat whoever it was to a pulp."

I giggle.

"Well, the first time…"

"The first time! There's more than one fucker?" he growls.

I giggle again.

"Why so surprised, Mr Cullen?"

He frowns briefly, running a hand through his hair, and looks at me as if seeing me in a completely different light. He shrugs.

"I just am. I mean – given your lack of experience."

I flush.

"Well, I've certainly made up for that since I met you," I whisper.

"You have." He grins. "Tell me. I want to know."

I gaze into patient green eyes, trying to gauge his mood. Is this going to make him mad, or does he genuinely want to know? I don't want him sulking… he's impossible when he's sulking.

"You really want me to tell you?"

He nods slowly once, and his lips twitch with an amused, arrogant smile.

"I was still in Phoenix with my Mom. I was in 10th grade. His name was Peter, and he was my lab partner in science."

"How old were you?"

"Fifteen."

"And what's he doing now?"

"I don't know."

"What base did he get to?"

"Edward!" I scold – and suddenly he grabs my knees, then my ankles, and tips me up so I fall back on to the couch. He slides smoothly on top of me, trapping me beneath him, one leg between mine. It's so sudden that I cry out in surprise. He grabs my hands and raises them above my head.

"So, this Peter – did he get to first base?" he murmurs, running his nose down the length of mine. He plants soft kisses at the corner of my mouth.

"Yes," I murmur against his lips. He releases one of his hands so that he can clasp my chin and hold me still while his tongue invades my mouth. *Oh my*… my mind flees and I surrender myself to his ardent kissing… holy guacamole.

"Like this?" Edward breathes when he comes up for air.

"No… nothing like that," I manage, as all the blood in my body heads south.

Releasing my chin he runs his hand down over my body and back up to my breast.

"Did he do this? Touch you like this?" His thumb skims over my nipple, through my vest, softly, repeatedly, and I can feel it harden under his expert touch.

"No," I breathe, writhing beneath him.

"Did he get to second base?" he murmurs in my ear. His hand moves down across my ribs, past my waist to my hip. He takes my earlobe between his teeth and gently tugs.

"No," I breathe.

Mulder blurts from the TV.

A good forensic scientist would know that there is not only a shoe print but also an impact point from inside the shoe. An indepth analysis of Tooms' injury would show that my foot was not inside the shoe at the time of impact.

Edward pauses, leans up, and presses mute on the remote. He gazes down again at me.

"What about Joe Schmo number two? Did he make it past second base?"

His eyes are smoldering hot… angry? Turned on? It's difficult to say which. He shifts to my side and slides his hand beneath my sweatpants.

"No…" I breathe, gazing up at him, trapped in his carnal green gaze. Edward smiles, wickedly.

"Good. No underwear, Mrs Cullen? I approve." His hand cups my sex and he kisses me again, as his fingers weave more magic, his thumb skimming over my clitoris, tantalizing me, as he pushes his index finger inside me with exquisite slowness.

I groan.

"We're supposed to be making out," I gasp.

Edward stills.

"I thought we were?"

"No, no sex."

"What?"

"No sex…"

"No sex, huh?" He withdraws his hand from my sweatpants. "Here." He traces my lips with his index finger, and I can taste me. He pushes his finger into my mouth, mirroring what he was doing a moment earlier. It tastes slick and salty. He shifts so he's between my legs, and I feel his erection pushing against me. He thrusts, once, twice, and again. I gasp, as the material of my sweatpants rubs in just the right way. He pushes once more, grinding into me.

"This what you want?" he breathes. He moves his hips rhythmically rocking against me.

"Yes." I moan.

His hand moves back to concentrate on my nipple once more and his teeth scrape along my jaw.

"Do you know how hot you are, Bella?" he whispers hoarsely as he rocks against me harder. I open my mouth to articulate a response, and fail miserably, groaning loudly. He captures my mouth once more, tugging at my bottom lip with his teeth before plunging into my mouth again. He releases my other wrist and my hands travel greedily up his shoulders and into his hair as he kisses me. When I pull on his hair he groans and he raises his eyes to mine.

"Ah…"

"Do you like me touching you?" I whisper.

His brow furrows briefly as if he doesn't understand the question. He stops grinding against me and he blinks once.

"Of course I do. I love you touching me, Bella. I'm like a starving man at a banquet when it comes to your touch," he murmurs with burning sincerity.

Holy crow…

He kneels between my legs and pulls me up to haul off my vest. I am naked beneath. Grabbing the hem of his shirt he yanks it over his head and tosses it on the floor, then pulls me onto his kneeling lap, his arms clasped just above my behind.

"Touch me," he breathes.

Oh my… Tentatively I reach up and brush the tips of my fingers through the smattering of chest hair over his sternum, over his burn scars. He inhales sharply, and his pupils dilate – but it's not with fear, it's a sensual response to my touch. He watches me intently as my fingers float delicately over his skin, first to one then the other nipple. I watch them pucker beneath my caress. Leaning forward I plant soft kisses on his chest, and my hands move to his shoulders, feeling the hard, sculptured lines of sinew and muscle. Jeez… he's in good shape.

"I want you," he breathes and it's a green light to my libido. My fingers are in his hair, pulling his head back so I can claim his mouth, fire licking hot and high in my belly. He groans and pushes me back onto the couch. He sits up and rips off my sweatpants, undoing his flies at the same time.

"Home run," he murmurs triumphantly, and in one swift move he eases into me.

"Ah…" I groan and he stills, grabbing my face between his hands.

"I love you, Mrs Cullen," he breathes and very slowly, very gently, he makes love to me… until I come apart at the seams, calling his name and wrapping myself around him, never wanting to let him go.

~o~

I lay sprawled on his chest. We're on the floor of the TV room.

"You know, we completely bypassed third base," I speculate mildly, my fingers tracing the line of his pectoral muscles.

He laughs.

"Next time, Mrs Cullen." He bends and kisses the top of my head.

I look up to stare at the TV screen where the end credits for the X Files play. Edward reaches for the remote and switches the sound back on.

"Wonder what those two would make of us?" I murmur.

"Mulder and Scully? Did they ever fuck?"

"I don't think so," I giggle. "I don't know. Before my time."

"They don't know what they were missing." Edward grins down at me. "I like making out with you, Mrs Cullen."

"Likewise, Mr Cullen." I kiss his chest and we lie silently watching as the X Files finish and the commercials come on.

"It's been a heavenly three weeks. Car chases and fires and psycho ex-bosses notwithstanding. Like being in our own private bubble," I mutter dreamily.

"Hmmm," Edward hums deep in his throat. "I'm not sure I'm ready to share you with the rest of the world yet."

"Back to reality tomorrow," I breathe.

Edward sighs and runs the hand that is not holding me through his hair.

"Security will be tight – " I put my finger over his lips. I don't want to hear this lecture again.

"I know. I'll be good. I promise." Which reminds me… I shift, propping myself up on my elbows to see him better. "Why were you shouting at Stuart?"

He stiffens immediately. *Oh shit.*

"Because we were followed."

"That wasn't Stuart's fault."

He gazes at me levelly.

"They should never have let you get so far in front. They know that."

I flush, and resume my position, resting on his chest. It was my fault. I wanted to get away from them.

"That wasn't – "

"Enough!" Edward is suddenly curt. "This is not up for discussion, Isabella. It's a fact – and they wont let it happen again."

Isabella! I am Isabella when I am in trouble… just like at home with my mother.

"Okay," I mutter, placating him. I don't want to fight. "Did Ryan catch up with the woman in the Dodge?"

"No. And I'm not convinced it was a woman."

"Oh?" I look up again.

"Stuart saw someone with their hair tied back, but it was a brief look. He assumed it was a woman. Now, given that you've identified that fucker, maybe it was him. He wore his hair like that." The disgust in Edward's voice is palpable.

I don't know what to make of this news. Edward runs his hand down my naked back, distracting me.

"If anything happened to you…" he murmurs.

I glance up at him and his eyes are wide and serious.

"I know," I whisper. I feel the same about you." I shiver at the thought.

"Come. You're getting cold," he says, sitting up. "Let's go to bed. We can cover third base there." He smiles a lascivious smile, as mercurial as ever, passionate, angry, anxious, sexy… my Fifty Shades. I take his hand and he pulls me to my feet, and without a stitch on, I follow him through the great room to the bedroom.

~o~

The following morning, Edward squeezes my hand as we pull up outside SIP. He looks very much the powerful executive in his dark navy suit and matching tie. He's not been this smart since… since the Ballet in Monaco. I smile at the memory.

"You know you don't have to do this?" Edward murmurs. I am tempted to roll my eyes at him.

"I know," I whisper, not wanting to be overheard by Stuart and Ryan in the front of the Merc. He frowns and I smile.

"But I want to," I continue. "You know this." I lean up and kiss him. His frown doesn't disappear.

"What's wrong?"

He glances uncertainly at Ryan as Stuart clambers out of the car.

"I'll miss having you to myself."

I reach up to caress his face.

"Me too." I kiss him. "It was a wonderful honeymoon. Thank you."

"Go to work, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs.

"You too, Mr Cullen."

Stuart opens the door. I squeeze Edward's hand once more before I climb out onto the sidewalk. Giving him a little wave I head into the building. Stuart holds open the door and follows me in.

"Hi Bella," Claire beams from behind the reception desk.

"Claire, hello," I smile back.

"You look so well. Good honeymoon?"

"The best, thank you. How's it been here?"

"Old man Roach is the same, but security has been stepped up and our server room is being overhauled. But Hanna will tell you."

Sure she will. I give Claire a friendly smile and head to my office.

Hanna is my assistant. She is tall, slim and ruthlessly efficient, to the point where I sometimes find her a little intimidating. But she's sweet to me, in spite of the fact that she's a couple of years older. She has my latte waiting – the only coffee I let her get for me.

"Hi Hanna," I say warmly.

"Bella, how was you honeymoon?"

"Fantastic. Here – for you." I pop the small bottle of perfume I bought for her onto her desk, and she claps her hands with glee.

"Oh thank you!" she says enthusiastically. "Your urgent correspondence is on your desk, and Roach would like to see you at 10.00. That's all I have to report for now."

"Good. Thank you. And thanks for the coffee." Wandering into my office I put my briefcase on my desk and gaze at the letters piled up there. I realize I have a lot to do.

Just before ten there's a timid tap on my door.

"Come in."

Victoria looks round the door.

"Hi, Bella. I just wanted to say welcome back."

"Hey Victoria. I have to say, reading through all this correspondence, I wish I was back in the South of France."

Victoria laughs, but her laughter is off… forced. I find myself cocking my head to one side and gazing at her, just like Edward does to me.

"Glad you're back safely," she says. "I'll see you in a few minutes, at the meeting with Roach."

"Okay," I murmur, and she shuts the door behind her. I frown at the closed door. *What was that about?* I shrug it off. My email pings – it's a message from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Errant Wives
Date: 24 August 2009: 09.56
To: Isabella Swan

Wife
I sent the email below and it bounced.
And it's because you haven't changed your name.
Something you want to tell me?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Attachment:
From: Edward Cullen
FW Subject: Bubble
Date: 24 August 2009: 09.32
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
Love covering all the bases with you.
Have a great first day back.
Miss our bubble.
x

Edward Cullen
Back in the Real World CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Shit. I hit reply immediately.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Don't Burst the Bubble
Date: 24 August 2009: 09.58
To: Edward Cullen

Husband
I am all for a baseball metaphor with you, Mr Cullen.
I want to keep my name here.
I'll explain this evening.
I am going in to a meeting now.
Miss our bubble too…

PS: Thought I had to use my Blackberry?

Isabella Swan
Commissioning Editor, SIP

This is going to be such a row. I can feel it. Sighing I gather up my papers for the meeting.

~o~

The meeting lasts for two hours. All the commissioning editors are there, plus Roach and Victoria. We discuss personnel, strategy, marketing, security and year-end. As the meeting progresses I grow more and more uncomfortable. There's a subtle change in how my colleagues are treating me… a distance and deference that wasn't there before I left for my honeymoon. And from Charlotte, who heads up the non-fiction division, there's downright hostility. Maybe I'm just being paranoid… but it goes some way to explaining Victoria's odd greeting this morning. My mind drifts back to the yacht, then to the playroom, then to the R8 speeding away from the mystery Dodge on I-5. Perhaps Edward's right… perhaps I can't do this any more. The thought is depressing – this is all I've ever wanted to do. If I can't do this, what will I do? As I walk back to my office I try to dismiss these dark thoughts.

When I sit down at my desk I quickly check my emails. Nothing from Edward. I check my BlackBerry… Still nothing. Good. At least there's been no adverse reaction to my email. Perhaps we'll discuss this tonight as per my request. I find that hard to believe, but ignoring my uneasy feeling I open the marketing plan I was given at the meeting.

~o~

As is our ritual on a Monday, Hanna comes into my office with a plate for my pre-packed lunch and we sit and eat our lunches together, discussing what we want to achieve during the week. She brings me up to date with the office gossip too, which I have to say – considering I've been away for three weeks – is pretty thin on the ground. As we're chatting there's a knock on the door.

"Come in."

Roach opens the door, and standing beside him is Edward. I am momentarily struck dumb. Edward shoots me a blazing look and stalks in, before smiling politely at Hanna.

"Hello, you must be Hanna. I'm Edward Cullen," he says. Hanna scrambles to her feet and holds out her hand.

"Mr Cullen. How nice to meet you," she stutters and they shake hands. "Can I fetch you a coffee?"

"Please," he says warmly. With a quick puzzled glance at me she scuttles out of the office past Roach, who stands as dumbstruck as me on the threshold of my office.

"If you'll excuse me Roach, I'd like a word with Ms Swan." Edward hisses the S's sibilantly… sarcastically.

This is why he's here… Oh shit.

"Of course, Mr Cullen. Bella," Roach mutters shutting the door to my office as he departs. I recover my power of speech.

"Mr Cullen, how nice to see you," I smile, far too sweetly.

"Ms Swan, may I sit down?"

"It's your company." I wave at the chair Hanna vacated.

"Yes, it is." He smiles wolfishly at me, the smile not reaching his eyes. His tone is clipped. He's bristling with tension – I can feel it. *Fuck.* My heart sinks.

"Your office is very small," he mutters as he sits down facing my desk.

"It suits me," I mutter.

He regards me neutrally, but I know he's mad. I take a deep breath. This is not going to be fun.

"So what can I do for you, Edward?"

" I am just looking over my assets."

"Your assets? All of them?"

"All of them. Some of them need re-branding."

"Re-branding? In what way?"

"I think you know." His voice is menacingly quiet.

"Please – don't tell me you have interrupted your day to come and row with me about my name*." I am not a freaking asset!*

He shifts and crosses his legs.

"Not exactly row. No."

"Edward, I'm working."

"Looked like you were gossiping with your assistant to me."

I flush.

"We were going through our schedules," I snap. "And you haven't answered my question."

There's a knock on the door.

"Come in!" I shout, too loudly.

Hanna opens the door and brings in a small tray. Milk jug, sugar bowl, coffee in a cafetiere – she's gone all out. She places the tray on my desk.

"Thank you Hanna," I mutter. Embarrassed that I have just shouted so loudly.

"Do you need anything else Mr Cullen?" she asks, all breathless. I want to roll my eyes at her.

"No, thank you. That's all." He smiles his dazzling, panty-dropping smile at her. She flushes, and exits simpering. Edward turns his attention back to me.

“Now, Miss Swan. Where were we?”

Chapter 97/10

"You were rudely interrupting my work day to come and fight with me about my name," I mutter angrily. Edward blinks rapidly – surprised, I think, by the vehemence in my voice. Deftly he picks at an invisible piece of lint on his knee with long skilled fingers. It's distracting. He's doing it on purpose. I narrow my eyes at him.

"I like to make the odd impromptu visit. It keeps management on their toes, wives in their place. You know." He shrugs, his mouth set in an arrogant line.

Wives in their place!

"I had no idea you could spare the time," I snap.

His eyes frost.

"Why don't you want to change your name here?" he asks, his voice deathly quiet.

"Edward, do we have to discuss this now?"

"I'm here. Don't see why not."

"I have a ton of work to do, having been away for the last three weeks."

He gazes at me, his green eyes cool and assessing… distant even. I marvel that he can appear so cold after last night… after the last three weeks. *Oh no.* He must be so mad – really mad. When will he learn not to over-react?

"Are you ashamed of me?" he asks, his voice deceptively soft.

What?

"No! Edward, of course not." I scowl at him. "This is about me – not you!" Jeez, he's exasperating sometimes. Silly overbearing megalomaniac.

"How is this not about me?" he whispers. He cocks his head to one side, genuinely perplexed, some of his detachment slipping as he stares at me with wide green eyes… and I realise in that moment that he's hurt. *Holy Fuck.* I've hurt his feelings. Oh no… he's the last person I want to hurt.

"Edward," I try for patience. "When I took this job, I'd only just met you." I shrug, struggling to find the words to explain. "I didn't know you were going to buy the company –" I stop. What can I say about that event in our brief history? His frankly

deranged reasons for doing so – his control freakery, his stalker tendencies gone mad, given completely free rein because he is so wealthy – all that's over and done with. I know he wants to keep me safe… but really, his ownership of SIP is the fundamental problem here. If he'd never interfered, I could continue as normal, and not have to face the disgruntled and whispered recriminations of my colleagues. I put my head in my hands, just to break eye contact with him.

"Why is it so important to you?" I breathe. I look up at his impassive stare… his green eyes glowing, giving nothing away, his earlier hurt now hidden. But even as I ask the question, deep down I know the answer before he says it.

"I want everyone to know that you're mine."

"I am yours – look." I hold up my left hand, showing my wedding and engagement rings.

"It's not enough."

"Not enough that I married you?" My voice is barely a whisper.

He blinks at me, registering the horror on my face. Where can I go from here? What else can I do?

"That's not what I mean," he mutters, and runs a hand through his overlong hair so that it flops onto his forehead.

"What *do* you mean?"

He swallows.

"I want your world to begin and end with me," he says, his expression raw. His comment completely derails me. It's like he's punched me hard in the stomach, winding me, wounding me. And the vision comes to mind of a small, frightened, copper-haired green-eyed boy in dirty, mismatched, ill-fitting clothes.

"It does," I murmur, because it's the truth. "I'm just trying to establish a career, and I don't want to trade on your name. I have to do *something,* Edward. I can't stay imprisoned at Escala or the new house with nothing to do. I'll go crazy. I'll suffocate. I've always worked – and I enjoy this. I really enjoy what I do. This is my dream job, it's all I've ever wanted. But doing this doesn't mean I love you less. You are the world to me." I can feel my throat swell and tears prick the back of my eyes. I must not cry… not here. I repeat it over and over in my head. *I must not cry. I must not cry.*

He stares at me, saying nothing. *Oh, what is he thinking?* Then a frown briefly crosses his face, as if he's considering what I've said.

"I suffocate you?" His voice is bleak, and it's an echo of a question he's asked me before.

"No… yes… no." This is such an exasperating conversation – not one that I want to have here, now. I close my eyes and rub my forehead, trying to fathom how we got to this.

"Look, we were talking about my name. I want to keep my name here because I want to put some distance between you and me, that's all. You know everyone thinks I got the job because of you, when the reality is – " I stop, and his eyes widen slightly.

"Do you want to know why you got the job, Isabella?"

Oh no… *Isabella?*

"What? What do you mean?"

He shifts in his chair as if steeling himself. *Shit!* Do I want to know?

"The management here gave you Smith's job to babysit. They didn't want the expense of hiring a senior executive when the company was mid-sale. They had no idea what the new owner would do with it once it passed into his ownership, and wisely, they didn't want an expensive redundancy. So they gave you Smith's job to caretake until the new owner – " He pauses, and his lips twitch in an ironic smile – "Namely me, took over."

Holy crap!

"What are you saying?" I breathe. So it *was* because of him. *Fuck!* Well – in a roundabout way. I am horrified.

He smiles slightly at my alarm.

"Relax. You've more than risen to the challenge. You've done very well." I can hear the tiniest hint of pride in his voice, and it's almost my undoing.

"Oh…" I murmur incoherently, reeling from this news. I sit right back in my chair, open-mouthed, staring at him. He shifts again.

"I don't want to suffocate you, Bella. I don't want to put you in a gilded cage. Well…" he pauses, his face darkening. "Well, the rational part of me doesn't." He strokes his chin thoughtfully, and I can almost hear his mind concocting something.

Oh, what is he thinking? It plagues me again. Edward looks up suddenly, as if he's had a Eureka moment.

"So one of the reasons I'm here – apart from dealing with my errant wife…" He narrows his eyes, "Is to discuss what I am going to do with this company."

Errant wife! I am not errant, and I'm not an asset! My subconscious tosses her book down in disgust and leaps to her feet from the comfort of her armchair, fisting her hands on her hips. I scowl at Edward again and the threat of tears subsides.

"What are you going to do?" I cock my head to one side, mirroring him, and I can't help my sarcastic tone. His lips twitch with the hint of a smile. Jeez – change of mood, again! How can I ever keep up with Mr Mercurial?

"I'm renaming the company – to Cullen Publishing."

Holy shit.

"And in a year's time, it will be yours."

What? My mouth drops open once more – wider this time.

"This is my wedding present to you."

I shut my mouth, then open it, trying to articulate something – but there's nothing there. My mind is blank.

"So, do I need to change the name to Swan Publishing?" he adds sarcastically.

He's serious. Holy fuck…

"Edward," I whisper, when my brain finally reconnects with my mouth. "I can't run a business."

He cocks his head to one side again and gives me a censorious frown.

"I ran my own business from the age of 21."

"But you're… you. Control freak and whiz-kid extraordinaire. Jesus, Edward – you majored in Economics at Harvard, before you dropped out. At least you have some idea. I sold maps and camping stoves for three years, for heaven's sake. I've seen so little of the world, and I know next to nothing!" My voice rises, growing louder and higher, as I complete my tirade.

"You're also the most well-read person I know," Edward counters earnestly. "You love a good book. You couldn't leave your job while we were on our honeymoon. You read how many manuscripts? Three?"

"Four," I whisper.

"And you wrote full reports on all of them. You're a very bright girl, Isabella. I'm sure you'll manage."

"Edward, are you crazy?"

"Crazy for you," he whispers.

What? And I snort… because it's the only expression my body can make. He narrows his eyes at me.

"You'll be a laughing stock, Edward. Buying a company for the little woman, who's been working for approximately two months of her adult life."

"Do you think I give a fuck what people think? Besides, you won't be on your own."

I gape at him. He really has lost his marbles this time.

"Edward, I…" I put my head in my hands. I feel like my emotions have been through a wringer. *What is he thinking?* And from somewhere dark and deep inside I have the sudden, inappropriate need to laugh. When I look up at him again his eyes widen.

"Something amusing you, Miss Swan?"

"Yes. You."

His eyes widen further, shocked but also amused.

"Laughing at your husband? That will never do. And you're biting your lip." His eyes darken… in that way. Oh no – I know that look. Sultry, seductive, salacious… No, no, no! Not here.

"Don't even think about it," I warn, alarm clear in my voice.

"Think about what, Isabella?"

"I know that look. We're at work."

He leans forward, his eyes glued to mine, molten green and hungry. *Holy Crow!* I swallow instinctively.

"We're in a small, reasonably sound-proofed office, with a lockable door," he breathes.

"Gross Moral Turpitude." I enunciate each word carefully.

"Not with your husband."

"With my boss's boss's boss." I hiss.

"You're my wife."

"Edward, no. I mean it. You can fuck me seven shades of Sunday this evening. But not now! Not here!"

He blinks, narrows his eyes once more. Then unexpectedly he laughs.

"Seven shades of Sunday?" he arches an eyebrow, intrigued. "I may hold you to that, Miss Swan."

"Oh, stop with the Miss Swan!" I snap, and thump the desk, surprising us both. "For heaven's sake Edward – if it means so much to you I'll change my name!"

His mouth pops open as he inhales sharply. And then he grins, a dazzling, all-teeth-showing, joyous grin. *Wow…*

"Good." He claps his hands, and all of a sudden he stands. *What now?*

"Mission accomplished. Now, I have work to do. If you'll excuse me, Mrs Cullen."

What? Gah – this man is so maddening!

"But – " I stutter.

"But what, Mrs Cullen?"

I sag.

"Just go."

"I intend to. I'll see you this evening. I'm looking forward to seven shades of Sunday."

I flush.

"Oh – and I have a stack of business-related social engagements coming up, and I'd like you to accompany me."

I gape at him. *Will you just go?*

"I'll have Angela call Hanna to put the dates in your calendar. There are some people you need to meet."

"Okay," I mumble, completely bemused, bewildered and shellshocked.

He leans over my desk. *What now?* I am caught in his hypnotic gaze.

"Love doing business with you, Mrs Cullen," he breathes. He leans in closer as I sit paralyzed and very gently plants a soft tender kiss on my lips.

"Laters, baby," he murmurs. He stands abruptly, winks at me, and leaves.

I lay my head on my desk. I feel like I've been run over by a freight train – the freight train that is my beloved husband. He has to be the most frustrating, annoying, contrary man on the planet. I sit up and frantically rub my eyes. *What have I just agreed to?*

Okay… Bella Cullen running SIP – I mean, Cullen Publishing. The man is mad. There's a knock on the door, and Hanna pokes her head round.

"You okay?" she asks.

I just stare at her.

She frowns.

"I know you don't like me doing this – but can I make you some tea?"

I nod.

"Twinings English Breakfast, weak and black?"

I nod.

"Coming right up, Bella."

I stare blankly at my computer screen, still in shock. How can I make him understand?

Email!

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: NOT AN ASSET!
Date: 24 August 2009: 14.23
To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen
Next time you come and see me – make an appointment – so I can at least have some prior warning of your adolescent overbearing megalomania.

Yours

Isabella Cullen<——please note name.
Commissioning Editor, SIP

I don't have to wait long for his reply.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Seven Shades of Sunday
Date: 24 August 2009: 14.34
To: Isabella Swan

My Dear Mrs Cullen (emphasis on My)
What can I say in my defense? I was in the neighborhood.
And no, you are not an asset, you are my beloved wife.
As ever, you make my day.

Edward Cullen
CEO & Overbearing Megalomaniac, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

He's trying to be funny, but I am in no mood to laugh. I take a deep breath and go back to my correspondence.

~o~

Edward is quiet when I climb into the car that evening.

"Hi," I murmur.

"Hi," he responds, warily – as he should.

"Disrupted anyone else's work today?" I ask, too sweetly.

The ghost of a smile crosses his face.

"Only Banner's."

Oh.

"Next time you go to see him, can I give you a list of topics I want covered?" I hiss at him.

"You seem out of sorts, Mrs Cullen."

I glare steadily in front of me, at the back of Ryan and Stuart's heads. Edward shifts beside me.

"Hey," he says softly and reaches for my hand. All afternoon, when I should have been concentrating on work, I have been trying to figure out what to say to him – and I've become angrier and angrier with each passing hour. I've had enough of his cavalier, petulant, and frankly childish behavior. I snatch my hand out of his… in a cavalier, petulant and childish manner.

"You're mad at me?" he whispers.

"Yes," I hiss. Folding my arms protectively across my body I gaze out of my window. I feel him shift beside me once more but I will myself not to look at him. I don't understand why I'm so mad at him – but I am. Really fucking mad.

As soon as we pull up outside Escala I break protocol and leap out of the car with my briefcase. I make my way into the building, not checking to see who is following. Ryan scuttles into the foyer quickly behind me and dashes to the elevator to press the call button.

"What?" I snap when I'm alongside him. He flushes.

"Apologies, ma'am," he mutters.

Edward comes and stands beside me to wait for the elevator, and Ryan retreats.

"So it's not just me you're mad at?" Edward murmurs dryly.

I glare up at him and I can see a trace of a smile on his face.

"Are you laughing at me?" I narrow my eyes.

"I wouldn't dare," he says, holding his hands up like I'm threatening him at gunpoint. He's in his navy suit, looking crisp and clean, with floppy sex-hair and burning sincere green eyes.

"You need a haircut," I mutter. I turn away from him and step into the elevator.

"Do I?" he says. Brushing his hair off his forehead with his hand he follows me into the elevator.

"Yes." I tap the code for our apartment into the keypad.

"So you're talking to me now?"

"Just."

"What exactly are you mad about? I need an indication," he asks cautiously.

I turn and gape at him.

"Do you really have no idea? Surely, for someone so bright, you must have an inkling? I can't believe you're that obtuse."

He gasps and takes a step back.

"You really are mad. I thought we had sorted all this in your office," he breathes, perplexed.

"Edward, I just capitulated to your petulant demands. That's all."

The elevator doors open and I storm out. Taylor is standing in the hallway. He takes a step back and quickly shuts his mouth as I steam past him.

"Hi Taylor," I mutter.

"Mrs Cullen," he murmurs.

Dropping my briefcase in the hallway I head into the great room. Mrs Cope is at the stove.

"Good evening, Mrs Cullen."

"Hi, Mrs Cope," I mutter once more. I head straight to the fridge and pull out a bottle of white wine.

Edward follows me into the kitchen and watches me like a hawk as I take a glass down from the cupboard. He removes his jacket and casually places it on the countertop.

"Do you want a drink?" I ask, super sweetly.

"No thanks," he says, not taking his eyes off me, and I know that he's helpless. He does not know what to do with me. It's comical on one level, and tragic on another. *Well, screw him!* I am having trouble locating my compassionate self since our meeting this afternoon. Slowly he removes his tie, then opens the top button of his shirt. I pour myself a large glass of Sauvignon Blanc and Edward runs a hand through his hair. When I turn around Mrs Cope has disappeared. *Shit!* She's my human shield. I take a slug of wine. *Hmmm.* It tastes good.

"Stop this," Edward whispers. He takes the two steps between us so he's standing in front of me. Gently he tucks my hair behind my ear and caresses the shell of my ear tenderly with his fingertips. It sends a shiver through me… is this what I've missed all day? His touch? I shake my head and gaze up at him.

"Talk to me," he murmurs.

"Edward, what's the point? You don't listen to me."

"Yes I do. You're one of the few people I do listen to."

I take another swig of wine.

"Is this about your name?"

"Yes and no. It's how you dealt with the fact that I disagreed with you." I gaze up at him, expecting him to be angered.

His brow furrows.

"Bella, you know I have… issues. It's hard for me to let go where you're concerned. You know that."

"I'm not a child, and I'm not an asset, Edward."

"I know," he sighs.

"Stop treating me as though I were," I whisper, imploring him with my eyes.

Softly he brushes the back of his fingers down my cheek and runs the tip of this thumb across my bottom lip.

"Please don't be mad. You're so precious to me. Like a priceless asset… like a child," he whispers, a somber, reverent expression on his face. I am distracted by his words. *Like a child?* Precious like a child… a child would be precious to him! *Oh my… Good.* But this is still messed up.

"I'm neither of those things, Edward. I'm your wife. If you were hurt that I wasn't going to take your name, you should have said."

"Hurt?" he asks. He frowns deeply, and I can tell that he's exploring the possibility in his mind. He blinks and straightens suddenly, still frowning, and glances quickly at his wristwatch.

"The architect will be here in just under an hour. We should eat."

Oh no… I groan inwardly. Tanya Denali. My shitty day just got shittier. I scowl at Edward.

"This discussion isn't finished," I mutter.

"What else is there to discuss?"

"You could sell the company."

Edward's eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"What?" he exclaims.

"Sell it."

"You think I'd find a buyer in today's market?" he exclaims.

"How much did it cost you?"

"It was relatively cheap." His tone is wary.

"So if it folds?"

He smirks.

"We'll survive. But I won't let it fold, Isabella. Not while you're there."

"And if I leave?"

"And do what?" Edward shrugs.

"I don't know. Something else."

"You've already said this is your dream job. And forgive me if I'm wrong, but I promised before God, Reverend Walsh and a congregation of our nearest and dearest to cherish you, and uphold your hopes and dreams, and keep you safe at my side."

"Quoting your wedding vows at me is not playing fair."

"When did I ever promise to play fair where you're concerned?" he asks, amused. "Besides," he adds. "You've wielded your vows at me like a weapon before."

I scowl at him. This is true.

"Isabella, if you're still angry with me, take it out on me in bed later," he murmurs. His voice is suddenly low and full of sensual longing, his emerald eyes heated.

What? Bed? How?

He smiles indulgently down at my expression. Is he expecting me to tie him up? *Holy crap!* My inner goddess removes her iPod earbuds and starts listening with rapt attention.

"Seven shades of Sunday," he whispers. "Looking forward to it."

Whoa!

"Gail!" he shouts abruptly, and four seconds later, Mrs Cope appears. Where was she? Taylor's office? Listening? Oh jeez.

"Mr Cullen?"

"We'd like to eat now, please."

"Very good, sir."

Edward doesn't take his eyes off me. He watches me warily, like I'm some exotic creature about to bolt. I take a sip of my wine.

"I think I'll join you," he says. He runs a hand through his hair again, signaling his exasperation, and lets out a long sigh.

~o~

"You're not going to finish?"

"No." I gaze down at my barely-touched plate of fettuccini.

Edward's expression darkens… and not in a good way. Before he can say anything I stand and clear our plates from the dining table.

"Tanya will be with us shortly," I mutter. Edward's mouth twists in an unhappy scowl, but he says nothing.

"I'll take those, Mrs Cullen," says Mrs Cope as I walk into the kitchen.

"Thank you."

"You didn't like it?" she asks, concerned.

"It was fine. I'm just not hungry."

Giving me a small sympathetic smile she turns to clear my plate and put everything in the dishwasher.

"I'm going to make a couple of calls," Edward announces, giving me a last assessing look before he disappears into his study.

I let out a sigh of relief and head off to our bedroom. Dinner was awkward. I am still mad at Edward and he doesn't seem to think he's done anything wrong. *Has he?* My subconscious cocks an eyebrow at me and gazes benignly over her half-moon glasses. Yes – he has. He's made it even more awkward for me at work. He didn't wait to discuss this issue with me when we were in the relative privacy of our own home. *Jeez* – how would he feel if I came barging into his office, laying down the law? And to cap it all – he wants to give me SIP! How the hell could I run a company? I know so little.

I gaze out at the Seattle skyline bathed in the pearly pink light of dusk. And as usual he wants to solve our differences in the bedroom… um… foyer… playroom… TV room… kitchen countertop… *Stop!* It always comes back to sex with him. Sex is his coping mechanism.

I wander into the bathroom and scowl at my reflection in the mirror. Coming back into the real world is hard. We managed to skate over all our differences while we were in our bubble, because we were so wrapped up in each other. But now… Briefly I am dragged back to my wedding, remembering my concerns that day – marry in haste… No, I mustn't think like this. I knew he was Fifty Shades when I married him. I just have to hang in there.

I squint at myself in the mirror. I look pale… and now I have that woman to deal with.

I'm wearing my grey pencil skirt and a sleeveless blouse. Right! My inner goddess gets out her harlot-red nail polish. I undo two buttons, exposing a little cleavage. I wash my face, then carefully reapply my make-up, applying more mascara than usual and putting extra gloss on my lips. Bending down I brush my hair vigorously from root to tip. When I stand my hair is a chestnut cloud around me. I tuck it artfully behind my ears and go in search of my pumps, rather than my flats.

When I re-emerge into the great room, Edward has the house plans spread out on the dining table. He has some music playing through the sound system. It stops me in my tracks.

"Mrs Cullen," he says warmly. He furrows his brow slightly as he gazes at me.

"What's this?" I ask. The music is stunning.

"Fauré. A requiem. You look different," he says, distracted.

"Oh. I've not heard it before."

"It's very calming, relaxing," he says and raises an eyebrow. "Have you done something to your hair?"

"Brushed it," I mutter. I am transported by the haunting voices. Abandoning the plans on the table he walks towards me, a slow saunter in time to the music.

"Dance with me?" he murmurs.

"To this? It's a requiem." I squeak.

"Yes." He pulls me into his arms and holds me, burying his nose in my hair and swaying gently from side to side. He smells his heavenly self. Oh… I've missed him. I wrap my arms around him and fight the urge to cry. *Why are you so infuriating?*

"I hate fighting with you," he whispers.

"Well, stop being such an arse."

He chuckles and I can feel the captivating sound reverberate through his chest. He tightens his hold on me.

"Arse?"

"Ass."

"I prefer Arse."

"You should. It suits you."

He laughs once more and kisses the top of my head.

"A requiem?" I murmur.

He shrugs.

"It's just a lovely piece of music, Bella."

Taylor coughs discreetly at the entranceway, and Edward releases me.

“Miss Denali is here,” he says.

Oh joy!

“Show her in,” Edward says. He reaches over and clasps my hand as Miss Tanya Denali enters the room.

Chapter 98/11

Tanya Denali is a good-looking woman – a tall, good-looking woman. Her long, blond, perfectly-coiffed hair hangs like a shimmering veil down her back. She's wearing a pale grey pant suit – the slacks and fitted jacket hug her lush curves. The clothes look expensive. At her throat a solitary diamond glints, matching the single-carat studs in her ears. She is well groomed – one of those women who grew up with money and breeding… though her breeding seems to be lacking this evening. Her blouse is palest blue, and undone too far. Like mine. I flush.

"Edward. Bella." She beams, showing perfect white teeth, and holds out a manicured hand to shake first Edward's, then my hand. It means I have to release Edward's hand to reciprocate. She's a fraction shorter than Edward, but then she's in killer heels.

"Tanya," Edward says politely. I smile, coolly, I think.

"You both look so well from your honeymoon," she says smoothly, her grey eyes gazing up at Edward through long dark tinted lashes. Edward puts his arm around me and pulls me close.

"We had a wonderful time, thank you." He brushes his lips against my temple, taking by surprise. Oh my. *See… he's mine.* Annoying – infuriating even – but mine. I grin up at him. *Right now I really love you, Edward Cullen.* I slip my hand around his waist then into his rear pants pocket and I squeeze his behind.

Tanya smiles thinly.

"Have you managed to look over the plans?"

"We have," I murmur. I gaze up at Edward, who grins down at me, one eyebrow raised in wry amusement. Amused at what? My reaction to Tanya or me squeezing his butt?

"Please," Edward says. "The plans are here." He gestures towards the dining table. Taking my hand he leads me over towards it, Tanya following in our wake. I finally remember my manners.

"Would you like something to drink?" I ask. "A glass of wine?"

"That would be lovely," Tanya says. "Dry white."

Shit! Sauvignon Blanc – that's a dry white, isn't it? Reluctantly leaving my husband's side I head over to the kitchen. I hear the iPod hiss as Edward switches off the music.

"Would you like some more wine, Edward?" I call.

"Please baby," he croons, grinning at me. Wow – he can be so swoon-worthy at times, and so infuriating at others. But mostly he's swoon-worthy… and suddenly I feel Edward and I are putting on a show, playing a game together – but this time we're on the same side. *Does he know?* Does he know that she's attracted to him, and being too obvious about it? It gives me a small rush of pleasure when I realize maybe he's trying to reassure me. Or maybe he's just sending a message loud and clear to this woman – that he's taken. Mine. *Yeah, bitch – mine.* My inner goddess is wearing her gladiatrix outfit, and she's taking no prisoners. Smiling to myself I collect three glasses from the cupboard, take the opened bottle of Sauvignon Blanc from the fridge, and place them all on the breakfast bar. Tanya is leaning over the table while Edward, standing beside her, points at something on the plans.

"I think Bella has some opinions on the glass wall. But generally we're both very pleased with the ideas you've come up with."

"Oh I'm so glad," Tanya gushes, obviously relieved – and as she says it she reaches out to briefly touch his arm in a small, flirty gesture. Edward stiffens subtly but immediately. She doesn't even seem to notice. *Leave him the fuck alone, lady. He doesn't like to be touched*.

Stepping casually aside, so he's out of her reach, Edward turns to me.

"Thirsty here," he says.

"Coming right up." He *is* playing the game. She makes him uncomfortable – why didn't I see that before? That's why I don't like her. He's used to how women react to him – I've seen it often enough – and usually he thinks nothing of it. Touching is something else. Well, Mrs Cullen to the rescue.

I quickly pour the wine, gather all three glasses in my hands and hurry back to my knight in distress.

I offer a glass to Tanya, positioning myself deliberately between them. She smiles courteously as she accepts it. I hand the second to Edward, who takes it eagerly, his expression one of amused gratitude.

"Cheers," Edward says to us both, but looking at me. Tanya and I raise our glasses and answer in unison. I take a welcome sip of wine.

"Bella, you have some issues with the glass wall?" Tanya asks.

"Yes. I love it – don't get me wrong. But I was hoping that we could incorporate it more sympathetically into the house. After all, I fell in love with house as it was, and I don't want to make any radical changes."

"I see."

"I just want it to be more sympathetic. More in keeping with the original house." I glance up at Edward, who is gazing at me thoughtfully.

"No major renovations?" he murmurs.

"No," I breathe back.

"You like it as it is?"

"Mostly, yes."

Edward's eyes glow warmly. Tanya glances at the pair of us, and her cheeks flush.

"Okay," she says. "I think I get where you're coming from, Bella. How about if we retain the glass wall, but have it open out on to a larger deck that's in keeping with the Mediterranean style. We have the stone terrace there already. We can put in pillars in matching stone, widely spaced so you'll still have the view. Add a glass roof, or tile it as per the rest of the house. It'll also make a sheltered al fresco dining and seated area."

Holy crow. Got to give the woman her due – she's good.

"Or instead of the deck, we could incorporate a wood color of your choice into the glass doors – that might help to keep the Mediterranean spirit," she continues.

"Like the bright blue shutters in the South of France," I murmur to Edward, who is watching me intently. He takes a sip of wine and shrugs, very non-committal. *Hmmm.* He doesn't like that idea.

Interestingly he doesn't overrule me, shout me down or make me feel stupid… God, this man is a mass of contradictions. His words from yesterday come to mind: *"I want this house to be the way you want. Whatever you want. It's yours."* He wants me to be happy – happy in everything I do. Deep down I think I know this. It's just – I stop myself. *Don't think about our argument now*. My subconscious glares at me.

Tanya is looking at Edward, waiting for him to make the decision. I watch as her pupils dilate slightly and her glossed lips part. Her tongue darts quickly over her top lip, then she takes a sip of her wine. When I turn to Edward he's still looking at me – not at her at all. *Yes!* My inner goddess' fist pumps the air. I am going to have words with Miss Denali.

"Bella, what do you want to do?" Edward murmurs, very clearly deferring to me.

"I like the deck idea."

"Me too."

I turn back to Tanya. Hey lady – look at me, not him. I'm the one making the decisions on this.

"I think I'd like to see revised drawings showing the bigger deck and pillars that are in keeping with the house."

Reluctantly Tanya drags her greedy eyes away from the fine form that is my husband, and smiles down at me. Does she think I'm not going to notice?

"Sure," she acquiesces pleasantly. "Any other issues?"

Other than you eye-fucking my husband?

"Edward wants to remodel the master suite," I murmur. There's a cough from the entrance to the great room. We three turn as one to find Taylor standing there.

"Taylor?" Edward asks.

"I need to confer with you on an urgent matter, Mr Cullen," Taylor explains, very formally. Edward clasps my shoulders from behind and addresses Tanya.

"Mrs Cullen is in charge of this project. She has absolute carte blanche. Whatever she wants, it's hers. I completely trust her instincts – she's very shrewd." His voice changes fractionally… in it I hear pride, and a subtle warning. A warning to Tanya?

He trusts my instincts? Oh, this man's exasperating. My instincts let him run roughshod over my feelings this afternoon. I shake my head slightly in frustration… but I'm grateful that he's telling Miss Provocative-but-unfortunately-Good-at-her-Job just who is in charge. Reaching up I caress his hand as it rests on my shoulder.

"If you'll excuse me." Edward squeezes my shoulders, then turns to follow Taylor, presumably to Taylor's study. I wonder idly what all that's about.

"So – the master suite?" Tanya asks nervously.

I gaze up at her, pausing for a moment to ensure that Edward and Taylor are out of earshot. Then calling on all my inner strength, and the fact that I've been seriously piqued for the last five hours, I let her have it.

"You're right to be nervous, Tanya, because right now your work on this project hangs in the balance. But I'm sure we'll be fine – as long as you keep your hands off my husband."

She gasps.

"Otherwise, you're fired. Understand?" I enunciate each word very clearly.

She blinks at me rapidly, utterly stunned. She cannot believe what I've said. *I* cannot believe what I've just said. But I hold my ground, gazing impassively into her widening grey eyes. *Don't back down. Don't back down!* I've learnt this maddening impassive look from Edward, who does impassive like no-one else. I know that renovating The Cullen's main residence is a hugely prestigious project for Tanya's architectural firm – a resplendent feather in her cap. She can't lose this commission. And right now I don't give a hoot that she's Emmett's friend.

"Bella – Mrs Cullen – I – I'm so sorry. I never…" She flushes, unsure what else she can say.

"Let me be clear. My husband is not interested in you."

"Of course," she murmurs, the blood now draining from her face.

"As I said, I just wanted to be clear."

"Mrs Cullen, I sincerely apologize if you think… I have …" She stops, still floundering for something to say.

"Good. As long as we understand each other, we'll be fine. Now – I'll let you know what we have in mind for the master suite, then I'd like a run down on all the materials you intend to use. As you know, Edward and I are determined that this house should be ecologically sustainable, and I'd like to reassure him as to where all the materials are coming from and what they are."

"Of course," she stutters, wide-eyed, and frankly a little bit intimidated by me. This is a first. My inner goddess runs round the arena, waving to the frenzied crowd.

Tanya pats her hair into place, and I realize this is a nervous gesture.

"The master suite?" she prompts anxiously, her voice a breathless whisper. Now that I have her on the back foot, I feel myself relax for the first time since my meeting with Edward this afternoon. I can do this. My inner goddess is celebrating her inner bitch.

~o~

Edward joins us just as we are finishing up.

"All done?" he asks. He puts his arm around my waist and turns to Tanya.

"Yes, Mr Cullen," Tanya smiles brightly – though to me her smile looks brittle. "I'll have the new plans with you in a couple of days."

"Excellent. You're happy?" he asks me directly, his green eyes warm and probing.

I nod, and blush for some reason I don't understand.

"Well, I'd better be going," Tanya says, again too brightly. She offers her hand – to me first this time, then to Edward.

"Until next time, Tanya," I murmur.

"Yes, Mrs Cullen. Mr Cullen."

Taylor has appeared at the entrance of the great room.

"Taylor will see you out," I say, loud enough for him to hear.

"Revised plans later this week." Patting her hair once more she turns on her high heels and heads out of the great room, followed closely by Taylor.

"She was noticeably cooler," Edward says, looking quizzically at me.

"Was she? I didn't notice." I shrug, trying to remain neutral. "What did Taylor want?" I ask, partly because I'm curious and partly because I want to change the subject. Frowning Edward releases me, and begins to roll up the plans on the table.

"It was about Smith."

Shit! Has he done something else?

"What about Smith?" I whisper. I can feel my face pale.

"It's nothing to worry about, Bella." Putting the plans down Edward draws me into his arms. "It turns out he hasn't been in his apartment for weeks, that's all." He kisses my hair, then releases me and finishes rolling up the plans.

Oh…

"So what did you decide on?" he asks, and I know it's because he doesn't want me to pursue the Smith line of enquiry.

"Only what you and I had discussed. I think she likes you." I add, quietly.

He snorts.

"Did you say something to her?" he asks.

I flush. How does he know? I stare down at my fingers.

"We were Edward and Bella when she arrived, and Mr and Mrs Cullen when she left," he continues, his tone dry.

"I may have said something…" I mumble.

When I peek up at him he's regarding me warmly, and for an unguarded moment, he looks… pleased. He drops his gaze, shaking his head, and his expression changes.

"She's only reacting to the way I look." He sounds vaguely bitter – disgusted, even. *Why?* I gaze at him, perplexed.

"What?" He's bemused by my expression. Then his eyes grow wide in alarm. "You're not jealous, are you?" he whispers in horrified surprise. I flush, and swallow, and stare down at my knotted fingers.

"Bella, she's a sexual predator – not my type at all." He cocks his head to one side. "How can you be jealous of her? Of anyone? Nothing about her interests me." When I look up at him he's gaping at me as if I'd grown an additional limb. He runs a hand through his hair.

But she's older and a… a sexual predator. Hasn't he fallen for one of those already? The specter of Mrs Robinson rises and haunts my mind.

"It's only you, Bella," Edward says quietly. "It will only ever be you."

I gasp as all the air leaves my lungs. Abandoning the plans once more Edward moves towards me and clasps my chin between his thumb and forefinger.

"How can you think otherwise? Have I ever given you any indication that I could be remotely interested in anyone else?" His eyes suddenly blaze with green fire, staring into mine.

"No," I whisper. "It's just… I don't know. She's older." I flush, and he knows exactly to whom I'm referring. I hurry on, "And she's worldly and sophisticated and talented. Seriously talented. It's obvious she got her job on her own merits."

"Bella, how can you think like that? You're young – we both are." He skims his thumb across my bottom lip. "When you're her age, you will be all those things – and more."

What? His faith in my abilities is astounding… and confusing. Only this morning he was telling me I didn't have to go to work. Oh, this is so complicated. I feel my eyes stinging from unshed tears.

"Have faith. Have faith in me and yourself, Bella." His quiet plea almost overwhelms me.

"Oh, Edward," I breathe, and my bottom lip trembles. "It's just… I'm trying to adapt to this new life that I had never imagined for myself. Everything is being handed to me on a plate – the job – you, my beautiful man… who I never… I never knew I'd love this way, this hard, this fast, this… indelibly." I take a deep steadying breath, as Edward's mouth drops open.

"But you're like a freight train, Edward… and I just don't want to get railroaded, because the girl you fell in love with will be crushed. And what'll be left? For a while now I've been thinking… all that would be left is a vacuous social x-ray of a woman." I pause once more, struggling to find the words to convey how I feel. "And now you want me to be a company CEO – which has never even been on my radar. I'm bouncing between all these ideas, struggling…" I stop, tears threatening, and I force back a sob.

"You've got to let me take my own decisions, my own risks, make my own mistakes… and let me learn from them." *Holy cow.* There… that's what I wanted to say this afternoon.

"You feel suffocated?" he whispers, alarmed.

I nod. He closes his eyes.

"Fair point, well made, Mrs Cullen." He runs his hand through his hair in agitation. "I just want to give you the world – everything and anything you want. And save you from it too, and keep you safe. You are so much more than the girl I fell in love with Bella. You're strong, independent, witty, warm… Oh Bella, you're everything I could ever want, and more. Don't doubt me. Never doubt me."

"I don't. I don't," I whisper. "But earlier today, I was so unprepared for your – " Again I struggle for the right words.

"Fifty shades," he says.

"Yes." And in spite of the fact that I feel like crying, I can't help a small smile. "Your fifty shades."

"I panicked," he whispers. "Why didn't you tell me about your name?"

"To be honest… I only thought about it while we were on our honeymoon, and well… I didn't want to burst the bubble. And then James… you know, it was distracting. I only remembered yesterday evening. I'm sorry, I should have told you, or discussed it with you… but I could never seem to find the right time." I flush, shamefaced.

Edward's intense gaze is unnerving. It's like he's trying to will his way into my skull. *Oh, what is he thinking?*

"Why did you panic?" I ask, as his earlier words come to mind.

"I don't know. I just don't want you to slip through my fingers."

"Oh Edward, for heaven's sake," I cry. "I'm not going anywhere. When are you going to get that through your incredibly thick skull?" My voice calms. "I. Love. You. More than… eyesight, space or liberty."

His eyes widen, and he half smiles.

"A daughter's love?" He quirks an amused eyebrow at me.

"No," I laugh, despite myself. "It's the only quote that came to mind."

"Mad King Lear?"

"Dear, dear mad King Lear." I reach up and caress his face, and he leans into my touch, closing his eyes.

"Would you change your name to Edward Swan, so everyone would know that you belong to me?"

Edward's eyes fly open, and he gazes at me as if I'd just said the world is flat. He frowns.

"Belong to you?" he murmurs, testing the words.

"Mine."

"Yours…" he says, repeating the words we spoke in the playroom only yesterday. "Yes, I would. If it meant that much to you."

Oh my…

"Does it mean that much to you?" I breathe.

"Yes." He is unequivocal.

"Okay," I breathe.

He cocks his head to one side.

"I thought you'd already agreed to this."

"Yes I have, but now we've discussed it further, I'm happier about my decision."

"Oh," he mutters, surprised. Then he smiles his beautiful, boyish yes-I-am-really-kinda-young smile, and he takes my breath away. Grabbing me by my waist he swings me round. I squeal and start to giggle, and I don't know if he's just happy, or relieved, or… what?

"Mrs Cullen, do you know what this means to me?"

"Yes, I do now."

He leans down and kisses me, his fingers moving into my hair, holding me tightly in place.

"It means seven shades of Sunday," he murmurs against my lips, and he runs his nose along mine.

Whoa!

"You think?" I lean back to gaze at him.

"Certain promises were made. An offer extended, a deal brokered," he whispers, his green eyes sparkling with wicked delight. I cock my head to one side and gaze up at him, marveling at this sudden change of mood. His temperament shifts as smoothly as the R8 gears.

"You reneging on me?" he asks uncertainly.

"Um…" I am still reeling, trying to follow his mood.

A speculative look crosses his face.

"I have an idea," he murmurs.

Oh… what kinky fuckery is this?

"A really important matter to attend to," he continues, suddenly all serious. No… what now?

"Yes, Mrs Cullen. A matter of the gravest importance."

Hang on – he's laughing at me.

"What?" I breathe.

"I need you to cut my hair. Apparently it's over-long, and my wife doesn't like it."

I gasp.

"I can't cut your hair!"

"Yes you can," Edward grins, and he blows up at the floppy hair hanging down over his forehead.

"Well… if Mrs Cope has a pudding bowl," I giggle.

He laughs.

"Okay, good point well made. I'll get Franco to do it."

I feel a stab of disappointment. Hmm… and doesn't Franco work for *her?* Maybe I could give him a trim. After all, I cut Charlie's hair for years, and he never complained.

"Come." I grab his hand. His eyes widen. I pull him after me, all the way to our bathroom, where I release his hand and grab the white wooden chair that stands in the corner. I place it in front of the sink. When I look at Edward he's gazing at me with ill-disguised amusement, thumbs tucked into the belt-loops at the front of his pants… but his eyes are smoking hot.

"Sit," I gesture to the empty chair, trying to maintain the upper hand.

"Are you going to wash my hair?" he asks, his voice husky.

I nod slowly. He arches one brow in surprise, and for a moment I think he's going to back down.

"Okay" he says softly. Reaching up he slowly begins to undo each button of his white shirt, starting with the one beneath his throat.

Oh my… My inner goddess pauses in her jaunt around the arena.

Nimble, deft fingers move to each button in turn until his shirt hangs open. Edward holds out a cuff and his mouth twitches in that challenging sexy way he has. *Undo this now!*

Oh… Cufflinks. I move towards him until I'm standing directly in front of him, without breaking eye contact. Then, with shaking fingers, I take his proffered wrist and remove the first one – a platinum disc with his initials engraved in a simple italic script. With that cufflink in my hand I reach for his second cuff, and with more assurance this time remove its matching twin. As I finish I glance at him, and his amused expression is gone, to be replaced by something hotter… much hotter. I reach up and push his shirt off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor.

"Ready?" I whisper.

"For whatever you want, Bella."

My eyes stray from his eyes to his lips. Parted so that he can inhale more deeply. Sculptured, chiseled, whatever, it is a beautiful mouth and he knows exactly what to do with it. I find myself leaning up to kiss him.

"No," he breathes, and places both of his hands on my shoulders. "Don't. If you do that, I'll never get my hair cut."

Oh!

"I want this," he continues. And his eyes are round and raw for some inexplicable reason. It's so disarming.

"Why?" I whisper.

He stares at me for a beat, and his eyes grow wider.

"Because it'll make me feel cherished."

My heart practically lurches to a halt. Oh Edward… my Fifty. And before I know it I've circled him in my arms, and I kiss his chest before nuzzling my cheek into his tickly chest hair.

"Bella," he breathes. He wraps his arms around me, and we stand immobile, holding each other in our bathroom. Oh, how I love to be in his arms. Even if he is an overbearing, megalomaniac arse, he's *my* overbearing megalomaniac arse… in need of a lifetime dose of TLC. I lean back, without releasing him.

"You really want me to do this?"

He nods and gives me his shy smile. I grin back at him and step out of his embrace. Taking his hand I lead him to the chair.

"Sit," I repeat.

He dutifully does so, sitting with his back to the sink. I take off my shoes and kick them over to where his shirt lies pooled on the bathroom floor. From the shower I retrieve his shampoo, Chanel. We bought it in France.

"Would sir like this?" I hold it up in both hands like I'm selling it on QVC. "Hand-delivered from the South of France. I like the smell of this… it smells of you," I add in a whisper, slipping out of my TV presenter mode.

"Okay." He grins.

I grab a small towel off the shelf above the radiator. Mrs Cope sure knows how to keep the towels super-soft.

"Lean forward," I order quietly. Edward complies, and I drape the towel around his shoulders, then turn on the taps and fill the sink with a mix of warm water.

"Lean back." Hmmm… I like being in charge. Edward leans back, but he's too tall. He shifts the seat forward, then tilts back the entire chair until the top rests against the sink. Perfect distance. He tips back his head. Bold green eyes gaze up at me and I can't help but smile down at him. Taking one of drinking glasses we keep on the vanity unity I dip it into the water, then tip it over Edward's head, soaking his hair. I repeat the process, leaning over him.

"You smell so good, Mrs Cullen," he breathes, and closes his eyes.

As I methodically wet his hair I can freely gaze at him. *Holy Crow.* Will I ever tire of this? Long dark lashes fanning across his cheeks, his mouth slightly parted, creating a small dark diamond shape, and I can hear him softly inhale. Hmmm… how I long to poke my tongue –

I splash water into his eyes. *Shit!*

"Sorry!"

He grabs the corner of the towel and laughs as he wipes the water out of his eyes.

"Hey, I know I'm an arse, but don't drown me."

I lean down and kiss his forehead, giggling.

"Don't tempt me."

Reaching up he curls his hand behind my head and shifts so that he captures my lips with his and he kisses me briefly making a low contented sound in his throat. The noise connects to the muscles deep in my belly. It's a very seductive sound. He releases me and lies back obediently, gazing up at me with expectation. For a moment he looks so vulnerable, like a child. It tugs at my heart.

His hair is now thoroughly wet, so I squirt some shampoo into my palm and start to massage it into his scalp, beginning at his temples and working over the top of his head then down the sides, circling my fingers rhythmically. He closes his eyes again and makes the low humming sound.

"That feels good," he breathes after a moment, and I can almost feel him relax beneath the strong, firm touch of my fingers.

"Yes it does," I agree, and I kiss his forehead once more.

"I like it when you scratch my scalp with your fingernails," he says, his eyes still closed. He looks so content – no longer vulnerable. Jeez, how much his expression has changed. It's subtle… but the vulnerability is gone.

"Head up," I command, and he obeys. Hmmm – a girl could get used to this. I rub the suds into the back of his hair, scraping my nails into his scalp.

"Back."

He leans back, and I rinse off the lather, using the glass. This time I manage not to splash him.

"Once more?" I ask.

"Please." His eyes flutter open and his contented green gaze finds mine. I grin down at him.

"Coming right up, Mr Cullen."

I turn to the sink that Edward normally uses and fill with warm water.

"For rinsing," I clarify, when his look turns quizzical.

I repeat the process with the shampoo, listening to his even deep breaths. Once he's all lathered up, I take another moment to appreciate the fine face of my husband. I cannot resist him. Tenderly I caress his cheek, and his eyes open slightly, watching me almost sleepily through his long lashes. *Holy cow!*

I lean forward and plant a soft, chaste kiss on his lips. He smiles, closes his eyes, and breathes out a sigh of utter contentment.

Jeez. Who would have thought after our argument this afternoon he could be this relaxed? Without sex? My subconscious purses her lips and glances up from a Bronte classic. I lean right over him.

"Hmmm," he murmurs appreciatively as my breasts brush his face. Resisting the urge to shimmy I pull the plug so the sudsy water drains away. His hands move to my hips and round to my behind.

"No fondling the staff," I murmur with fake disapproval.

"Don't forget I'm deaf," he breathes, keeping his eyes closed, as he runs his hands down past my behind and starts to hitch up my skirt. I swat his arm. I'm enjoying playing hairdresser. He grins, big and boyish, like I've caught him doing something illicit that he's secretly proud of.

I reach for the glass again, but this time use the water from the neighboring sink to carefully rinse all the shampoo from his hair. I continue to lean over him, and he keeps his hands on my backside, thrumming his fingers back and forward, up and down… back and forth… hmmm. I wiggle. He growls low in his throat.

"There. All rinsed."

"Good," he breathes, and his fingers tighten around me, and all at once he sits up, his hair soaking and dripping all over him. He pulls me down onto his lap, his hands moving from my behind up to the nape of my neck, then to my chin, holding me in place. I gasp with surprise and his lips are on mine, his tongue hot and hard in my mouth. My fingers curl around his wet hair and I can feel the drips running down my arms to his chest and on to my face, as he deepens the kiss, and his hand moves from my chin down to the top button of my blouse.

"Enough of this primping," he murmurs. "I want to fuck you seven shades of Sunday, and we can do it in here, or in the bedroom. You decide."

Chapter 99/12

Edward's green eyes blaze into mine, hot and full of promise, his hair dripping water on to us both. My mouth goes dry.

"What's it to be, Isabella?" he breathes as he holds me seated across his lap.

"You're wet," I respond.

He bends his head suddenly, running his dripping hair all down the front of my blouse. I squeal and try to wriggle off him. He tightens his grip around me.

"Oh no you don't, baby," he murmurs. When he raises his head he's grinning salaciously at me and I am Miss Wet Blouse 2009. My top is soaked and now totally see-through. I am wet… everywhere.

"Now you're wet too. Love the view," he murmurs. And he leans down and runs his nose round and round one wet nipple. I squirm.

"Answer me, Bella. Here or the bedroom?"

"Here," I whisper frantically. To hell with the haircut – I'll do it later.

He smiles slowly, his lips curling into a sensuous smile full of licentious promise.

"Good choice, Mrs Cullen," he breathes against my lips. He releases my chin and his hand moves to my knee. It glides smoothly up my leg, lifting my skirt and skating over my skin, making me tingle. His lips trail soft kisses from the base of my ear along my jaw.

"Oh, what shall I do to you?" he whispers. His fingers halt at my stocking tops. "I like these," he murmurs. He runs a finger underneath the top and skims it round to my inner thigh. I gasp and squirm once more in his lap.

He groans, low in his throat.

"If I'm going to fuck you seven shades of Sunday, I want you to keep still," he scolds me mildly.

"Make me," I challenge, my voice soft and breathy.

Edward inhales sharply. He narrows his eyes and regards me with a hot, hooded expression.

"Oh, Mrs Cullen. You have only to ask." His hand moves from my stocking tops up to my panties. "Let's divest you of these." He pulls gently and I shift to help him. His breath hisses through his teeth as I do.

"Keep still," he grumbles.

"I'm helping," I pout, and he seizes my lower lip gently between his teeth.

"Still," he growls. He slides my panties down my legs. Tugging my skirt up so that it's bunched around my hips, he moves both hands to my waist and lifts me slightly. He still has my panties in his hand.

"Sit. Astride me," he orders softly, staring intently into my eyes.

I do as I'm told and move my leg, regarding him provocatively. *Bring it on Fifty!*

"Mrs Cullen," he breathes. "Are you goading me?" He gazes at me, amused but aroused, and it's a seductive combination.

"Yes," I breathe. "What are you going to do about it?"

His eyes light up in surprised delight at my challenge and I can feel his arousal beneath me.

"Clasp your hands together behind your back," he murmurs.

Oh! I comply obediently and deftly he binds my wrists together with my panties. He fastens them tight.

"My panties? Mr Cullen, you have no shame," I admonish, softly.

"Not where you're concerned, Mrs Cullen, but you know that." His look is intense and hot. Putting his hands around my waist he shifts me so I am sitting slightly further back on his lap. Water still drips down his neck and over his chest. I want to bend forward and lick the drips off but it's harder now that I am restrained.

Edward caresses both of my thighs and skims his hands down to my knees. Gently he pushes them further apart, and widens his own legs, holding me in that position. His fingers move to the buttons of my blouse.

"I don't think we need this," he says. He starts methodically undoing each button on my clinging wet blouse, his eyes never leaving mine. They get darker and darker as he finishes the task, taking his own sweet time about it. My pulse quickens and my breathing shallows. I can't believe it – he's hardly touched me and I feel like this – hot, bothered… ready. I want to squirm. He leaves my damp blouse hanging open and his hands move to

my face, both hands, his fingers caressing my cheek, a thumb skimming across my bottom lip. Suddenly he thrusts his thumb into my mouth.

"Suck," he orders softly, stressing the 's'. I close my mouth around him and do exactly that. Hmmm… he tastes good. What else would I like to suck? The muscles in my belly clench at the thought. His lips part when I scrape my teeth and bite the soft pad of his thumb.

"Ah," he breathes. Slowly he extracts his thumb and trails it wet down my chin, down my throat, over my sternum. He hooks it into the cup of my bra and yanks the cup down, freeing my breast. Edward's eyes never leave mine. He's watching each reaction that his touch elicits from me, and I'm watching him. It's so hot. Consuming. Possessive. I love it. He mirrors his actions with his other hand, so both my breasts are free, and cupping them gently he skims each thumb over each nipple, circling slowly, teasing and taunting each one, so that they harden and lengthen beneath his skillful touch. I try, I really try not to move, but my nipples are hotwired to my groin. I moan and throw my head back and close my eyes, surrendering to the sweet, sweet torture.

"Shh," Edward soothes, his voice at odds with the teasing even-tempo'd rhythm of his wicked fingers. "Still, baby, still." Releasing one breast he reaches up behind me and splays his hand around the nape of my neck. Leaning forward he takes my now bereft nipple into his mouth and sucks, hard, his wet hair tickling me. At the same time his thumb stops skimming across my other elongated nipple. Instead he takes it between his thumb and forefinger, and tugs and twists it gently.

"Ah! Edward!" I groan and buck forward on his lap. But he doesn't stop. He continues the slow, leisurely, agonizing tease. And my body is burning as the pleasure takes a darker turn.

"Edward, please," I whimper.

"Hmmm," he hums low in his chest. "I want you to come like this." My nipple gets a brief respite as he breathes the words and it's like he's calling to a deep, dark part of myself that only he knows. When he resumes, with his teeth this time, it's only just not painful. Moaning loudly I writhe on his lap, trying to find some precious friction against his pants. I pull uselessly against my restraining panties, itching to touch him, but I'm lost, lost in this treacherous sensation.

"Please," I whisper, pleading, and I can feel the pleasure straining through my body, from my neck, right down to my legs, to my toes, tightening all in its wake.

"You have such beautiful breasts, Bella," he breathes. "One day I'll fuck them."

What? Gah! What the hell does that mean? Opening my eyes I gape down at him as he suckles me and my skin sings under his touch. I can't feel my sodden blouse, his wet hair… nothing except the burn. And it burns deliciously hot and low, deep in my belly, and all thought is obliterated as I can feel my body tightening and clenching… ready, reaching… pining for release. And he doesn't stop – teasing, pulling, driving me wild. I want… I want…

"Let go," he breathes – and I do, loudly, my orgasm convulsing through my body, and he stops his sweet torture and wraps his arms around me, clutching me to him as my body spirals down from my climax. When I open my eyes, he is gazing down at me where I rest against his chest.

"God, I love to watch you come, Bella," he says.

"That was…" Words fail me.

"I know." He leans forward and kisses me, his hand still at the nape of my neck, holding me just so, angling my head so he can kiss me deeply – with love, with reverence. *Oh my.* I am lost in his kiss.

He pulls away to draw breath, his eyes dark jade.

"Now I'm going to fuck you, hard," he breathes.

Holy cow. Grabbing me round the waist he lifts me from his thighs down to the edge of his knees, and reaches with his right hand for the button on the waistband of his navy pants. He runs the fingers of his left hand up and down my thigh, stopping at my stocking tops each time. When I glance up at him he's watching me intently. We're face to face and I'm helpless, trussed up by my bra and my panties, and this has to be one of the most intimate times we've had – me sitting on his lap, staring into his beautiful green eyes. It makes me feel so wanton, but also so connected to him – I am not embarrassed or shy. This is Edward, my husband, my lover, my overbearing megalomaniac, my Fifty… the love of my life. He reaches for his zipper, and my mouth goes dry as his erection springs free.

He smirks at me.

"You like?" he whispers.

"Hmm," I murmur appreciatively. He wraps his hand around himself and moves it up and down… *Holy Fuck!* I gaze up at him through my lashes. Fuck he's so sexy.

"You're biting your lip, Mrs Cullen."

"That's because I'm hungry."

"Hungry?" His mouth opens in surprise and his eyes widen a fraction.

"Hmm…" I agree, and lick my lips.

He gives me his enigmatic smile and cocks his head to one side as he continues to stroke himself. Why is the sight of my husband pleasuring himself such a turn-on?

"I see. You should have eaten your dinner." His tone is mocking and censorious at once. "But maybe I can oblige." He puts his hands on my waist.

"Stand," he says softly, and I know what he's going to do. I get to my feet, my legs no longer shaking.

"Kneel."

I do as I'm told and kneel down on the cool tiled floor of the bathroom. He slides forward on the seat of the chair.

"Kiss me," he breathes, holding his erection. I glance up at him, and he runs his tongue over his top teeth. It's arousing, very arousing, to see his desire, his naked desire for me and my mouth. Leaning forward, my eyes on his, I kiss the tip of his erection. I watch him inhale sharply and clench his teeth. My inner goddess strips off her gladiatrix costume and kneels, licking her harlot-red lips. Edward cups the side of my head and I run my tongue over the tip, tasting the small bead of dew on the end. Hmm… he tastes good. His mouth drops open further as he gasps and I pounce, pulling him into my mouth and sucking hard.

"Ah – " The air hisses through his teeth and he flexes his hips forward, thrusting into my mouth. But I don't stop. Sheathing my teeth behind my lips I push down and then pull up on him. He moves both hands so that he fully cups my head, burying his fingers in my hair, and slowly eases himself in and out of my mouth, his breathing quickening, growing harsher. I twirl my tongue around his tip and push down again in perfect counterpoint to him. We're moving as one.

"Jesus, Bella," he sighs, and screws his eyes tightly… he's lost, and it's heady, his response to me. *Me.* My inner goddess could light up Escala she's so thrilled. And very slowly I draw my lips back, so it's just my teeth.

"Ah!" Edward stops moving. Leaning forward he grabs me and pulls me up onto his lap.

"Enough!" he growls. Reaching behind me he frees my hands with one tug on my panties. I flex my wrists and stare from under my lashes into scorching green eyes that gaze back at me with love and longing and awe… And I realize, in that moment, it's me

that wants to fuck him seven shades of Sunday. I want him badly. I want to watch him come apart beneath me. I grab his erection and scoot over him. Placing my other hand on his shoulder, very gently and slowly, I ease myself on to him. He makes a guttural, feral noise deep in his throat, and reaching up pulls my blouse off and lets it fall to the floor. His hands move to my hips.

"Still!" he rasps, his hands digging into my flesh. "Please, let me savor this. Savor you."

I stop. *Oh my…* he feels so good inside me. He caresses my face, his eyes wide and wild, his lips parted as he breathes. He flexes beneath me and I moan, closing my eyes.

"This is my favorite place," he breathes. "Inside you. Inside my wife."

Oh fuck. Edward. I cannot hold back. I reach for him, my fingers gliding into his wet hair, my lips seeking his, and I start to move. Up and down on my toes, savoring him, savoring me. He groans loudly, and his hands are in my hair and around my back, and his tongue invades my mouth greedily taking all that I willingly give. After all our arguing today, my frustration with him, his with me… we still have this – we will always have this. I love him so much, it's almost overwhelming… like him. His hands move to my backside and he controls me, moving up and down, again and again, at his pace – his hot, slick tempo.

"Ah," I groan helplessly into his mouth as I'm carried away.

"Yes. Yes, Bella," he hisses, and I rain kisses on his face, his chin, his jaw, his neck.

"Baby," he breathes, capturing my mouth once more.

"Oh Edward, I love you. I will always love you," I gush breathlessly, wanting him to know, wanting him to be sure of me. He moans loudly and wraps his arms around me tightly as he climaxes, with a mournful sob… and it's enough – enough to push me over the brink once more. I clutch my arms around his head and let go, and I come around him, tears springing to my eyes because I love him so.

~

"Hey," he whispers, tipping my chin back and gazing at me with quiet concern. "Why are you crying? Did I hurt you?"

"No," I mutter reassuringly. He smoothes my hair off my face, wipes away a lone tear with this thumb and tenderly kisses my lips. He is still inside me. He shifts and I wince as he pulls out of me.

"What's wrong, Bella? Tell me."

I sniff.

"It's just… it's just sometimes I'm overwhelmed by how much I love you," I whisper.

He blinks down at me, green eyes surprised and light, the color of a forest in spring.

"Oh," he says. Then he smiles his special shy smile – reserved for me I think. "You have the same effect on me," he whispers, and kisses me once more. I smile up at him, and inside my joy unfurls and stretches lazily.

"Do I?"

He smirks.

"You know you do."

"Sometimes I know. Not all the time."

"Back at you, Mrs Cullen," he whispers.

I grin and gently place feather-light kisses over his chest. I nuzzle his chest hair. Edward caresses my hair and runs a hand down my back. He unclasps my bra and pulls the strap down one arm. I shift, and he tugs the strap down the other arm, and drops my bra on the floor.

"Hmm. Skin on skin," he murmurs appreciatively and folds me in his arms again. He kisses my shoulder and runs his nose up to my ear. "You smell like heaven, Mrs Cullen."

"Back at you, Mr Cullen." I nuzzle him again and inhale his Edward smell… now mixed with the heady scent of sex. I could stay wrapped in his arms like this, sated and happy, forever. It's just what I need after a fraught day of back-to-work, of arguing, of bitch-slapping… this is where I want to be. In spite of his control freakery, his uncontrolled megalomania, this is where I belong. Edward buries his nose in my hair and inhales deeply. I let out a contented sigh, and I can feel his smile… oh my… and we sit, arms clasped around each other, saying nothing.

Eventually reality intrudes.

"It's late," Edward says, his fingers methodically stroking my back.

"Your hair still needs cutting."

He chuckles.

"That it does, Mrs Cullen. Do you have the energy to finish the job you started?"

"For you Mr Cullen, anything." I kiss his chest once more and reluctantly stand.

"Don't go." Clasping my hand he turns me round. He straightens then undoes my skirt, letting it drop to the floor. He holds his hand out to me. I take it and step out of my skirt. Now I am dressed solely in stockings and garter belt.

"You are a mighty fine sight, Mrs Cullen," he says softly. He sits back in the chair and crosses his arms, giving me a full and frank appraisal. I hold out my hands and twirl for him.

"God, I'm a lucky son of a bitch," he says admiringly.

"Yes you are," I tease.

He grins.

"Put my shirt on and you can cut my hair. Like this you'll distract me – and we'll never get to bed."

I can't help my answering smile. Knowing that he's watching my every move I sashay over to where we left my shoes and his shirt. Bending slowly I reach down, pick up his shirt, smell it – *hmmm* – then shrug it on.

"Do we have any scissors?" I ask innocently.

Edward blinks at me, his eyes round. He's redone his flies and is sitting watching me intently.

"My study?" he croaks.

"I'll go search."

Leaving him I walk into our bedroom. I grab my comb from the dressing table, then head for his study. As I enter the main corridor I notice the door to Taylor's office is open. Mrs Cope is standing just beyond the door. I stop, rooted to the spot.

Taylor is running his fingers down her face and smiling sweetly at her. Then he leans down and kisses her.

Holy Crow! Taylor and Mrs Cope? I gape in astonishment – I mean, I thought… well, I kind of suspected. But obviously they are together! I flush, feeling like a voyeur, and finally manage to get my feet to move. I scamper across the great room and into Edward's

study. Switching on the light I make my way over to his desk. Taylor and Mrs Cope… Wow! I'm reeling. It's like catching your parents at it! I always thought think Mrs Cope was older than Taylor. Oh, I have to get my head around this. I open the top drawer, and am immediately distracted when I find a gun. *Edward has a gun!*

A revolver. *Holy Fuck!* I had no idea Edward owned a gun. I take it out, slip the release and check the cylinder. It's fully loaded. What does Edward want with a gun? Jeez, I hope he knows how to use it. Charlie's perpetual warnings about handguns run quickly through my mind. *These will kill you, Bella. You need to know what you're doing when you're handling a firearm*. I put the gun back and find the scissors. Retrieving them quickly I head back to Edward, my head buzzing. Taylor and Mrs Cope… the revolver…

At the entrance to the great room I run into Taylor.

"Mrs Cullen, excuse me." He flushes as he quickly takes in my attire.

Holy shit!

"Um, Taylor, hi… um. I'm cutting Edward's hair," I blurt out, embarrassed. Taylor is as mortified as I am. He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it quickly and stands aside.

"After you ma'am," he says formally. I think I'm the color of my old truck. Jeez. Could this be more embarrassing?

"Thank you," I mutter and dash down the hallway. *Crap!* Will I ever get used to the fact that we're not alone? I bolt into the bathroom, breathless.

"What's wrong?" Edward asks. He's standing in front of the mirror holding my shoes. All of my scattered clothes are now neatly piled beside the sinks.

"I just ran into Taylor."

"Oh." Edward frowns. "Dressed like that."

Oh Shit!

"That's not Taylor's fault." I leap to Taylor's defense.

Edward's frown deepens.

"No. But still."

"I'm dressed."

"Barely."

"I don't know who was more embarrassed, me or him." I try my distraction technique. "Did you know he and Gail are… well – together?"

Edward blinks at me, then laughs.

"Yes, of course I knew."

"And you never told me?"

"I thought you knew too."

"No."

"Bella, they're adults. They live under the same roof. Both unattached. Both attractive."

I flush.

"Well, if you put it like that… I just thought Gail was older than Taylor," I huff.

"She is, but not by much." He gazes at me, perplexed. "Some men like older women." He stops abruptly, and his eyes widen.

I scowl at him.

"I know that!" I snap. Edward looks contrite. He smiles fondly at me. Yes! Distraction technique successful! My subconscious rolls her eyes at me – but at what cost? Now the unmentionable Mrs Robinson is looming over us.

"That reminds me," he says, brightly.

"What?" I mutter petulantly. Grabbing the chair I turn it to face the mirror above the sinks. "Sit," I order. Edward regards me with indulgent amusement, but does as he's told, and sits back down in the chair. I start to comb through his now merely damp hair.

"I was thinking we could convert the rooms over the garages for them. Make it a home. Then maybe Taylor's daughter could come and stay with him more often." Edward watches me carefully through the mirror.

Oh!

"Why doesn't she stay here?"

"Taylor's never asked me."

"Perhaps you should offer. But we'd have to behave ourselves."

Edward's brow furrows.

"I hadn't thought of that."

"Perhaps that's why Taylor hasn't asked. Have you met her?"

"Yes. She's a sweet thing. Shy. Very pretty. I pay for her schooling."

Oh! I stop combing and stare at him in the mirror.

"I had no idea."

He shrugs.

"Seemed the least I could do. Also it means he won't quit."

"I'm sure he likes working for you."

Edward stares at me blankly, then shrugs.

"I don't know."

"I think he's very fond of you, Edward," I mutter and resume combing. I glance at him, and he's watching me intently.

"You think?"

"Yes. I do."

He snorts, a contented sound.

"Good," he says. "Will you talk to Tanya about the rooms over the garage?"

"Yes, of course." I don't feel the same irritation I did before at the mention of her name. My subconscious nods sagely at me. Yes… we done good today, as far as Tanya was concerned. My inner goddess gloats.

I am ready to cut Edward's hair.

"You sure about this?" I whisper. "Your last chance to duck out."

“Do your worst, Mrs Cullen. I don’t have to look at me, you do.”

I grin.

“Edward, I could look at you all day.”

He shakes his head slightly, as if exasperated.

“It’s just a pretty face, baby.”

“And behind it is a very pretty man.” I kiss his temple. “My man.”

He grins shyly.

I have mentally divided Edward’s head of hair into eight sections. Lifting a lock from the first section I comb it upwards and snare it between my index and middle finger. I put the comb in my mouth, take the scissors and make the first snip, cutting an inch off the length. Edward closes his eyes and sits like a statue, sighing contentedly as I continue. Occasionally he opens his eyes and I catch him watching me intently. He doesn’t touch me while I work, and I’m grateful… His touch is so distracting.

~

Fifteen minutes later, I’m done.

“Finished,” I mutter. And I’m pleased with the result. He looks as hot as ever, his hair still floppy and sexy… just a bit shorter. Edward gazes at himself in the mirror, looking pleasantly surprised. He grins.

“Great job, Mrs Cullen.” He turns his head from side to side and snakes his arm around me. Pulling me to him he kisses and nuzzles my belly.

“Thank you,” he breathes.

“My pleasure.” I bend and kiss him briefly.

“It’s late. Bed.” He gives my behind a playful slap.

“Ah! I should clean up in here,” I protest. There is hair all over the floor.

Edward frowns, as if the thought would never have occurred to him.

“Okay, I’ll get the broom, ” he says wryly. “I don’t want you embarrassing the staff with your lack of appropriate attire.”

“Do you know where the broom is?” I ask innocently. This stops Edward in his tracks.

“Um… no.”

I laugh.

“I’ll go.”

~o~

As I clamber into bed and wait for Edward to join me, I reflect on how differently this day could have ended. I was so mad at him earlier, and he with me. How am I going to deal with this running-a-company nonsense? I have no desire to run my own company. I am not him. I need to head this off at the pass. Perhaps I should have a safe word for when he’s being overbearing and domineering… for when he’s being an arse. I giggle. Perhaps the safe word should be ‘arse’. I find the thought very appealing.

“What?” he says, as he climbs into bed beside me wearing only his pj pants.

“Nothing,” I murmur. “Just an idea.”

“What idea?” he asks, stretching out beside me.

Here goes nothing…

“Edward, I don’t think I want to run a company.”

He props himself up on his elbow and gazes down at me.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because it’s not something that has ever appealed to me.”

“You’re more than capable, Isabella.”

I shrug, flushing.

“I like to read books, Edward. Running a company will take me away from that.”

“You could be the Creative Head.”

I frown.

"You see," he continues, "Running a successful company is all about embracing the talent of the individuals you have at your disposal. If that's where your talents and your interests lie, then you structure the company to enable that."

What?

"Don't dismiss it out of hand, Isabella. You are a very capable woman."

Again I am floored by his simple faith in my abilities. How can he possibly know that I'd be any good at this?

"I'm also worried it will take up too much of my time."

Edward frowns.

"Time I could devote to you," I whisper, deploying my secret weapon. His gaze darkens.

"I know what you're doing," he murmurs, amused.

Damn it!

"What?" I feign innocence.

"You're trying to distract me from the issue at hand. You always do that. Just don't dismiss the idea, Bella. Think about it. That's all I ask." He leans down and kisses me chastely, then skims his thumb down my cheek. I can see that this argument is going to run and run. I smile up at him – and something he said earlier today pops unbidden into my mind.

"Can I ask you something?" My voice is soft, tentative.

"Of course."

"Earlier today you said if I was angry with you I should take it out on you in bed. What did you mean?"

He stills.

"What did you think I meant?" he asks, his brow furrowed.

Holy shit… I should just say it.

"That you wanted me to tie you up."

His eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

"Um… no. That's not what I meant at all."

"Oh." I can't help a small stab of disappointment.

"You want to tie me up?" he gasps, obviously reading my expression correctly. He sounds shocked. I blush.

"Well…"

"Bella, I…" he stops, and something dark crosses his face. *Oh no.*

"Edward," I whisper, alarmed. I move so that I am lying on my side, propped up on my elbow like him. Reaching over I caress his face. His eyes are large and fearful. He shakes his head sadly.

Shit!

"Edward, hush. Stop. It doesn't matter. I thought that's what you meant."

He takes my hand and places it on his pounding heart. *Fuck!* What is it?

"Bella, I don't know how I'd feel about you touching me if I was restrained," he whispers.

My scalp prickles. It's like he's confessing something deep and dark.

"This is still too new." His voice is low and raw.

Fuck. It was just a question… and in that moment I realize that he's come a long way, but he still has a long way to go. *Oh, Fifty, Fifty, Fifty.* Anxiety grips my heart. I lean over and he freezes, but I plant a soft kiss at the corner of his mouth.

"Edward, I got the wrong idea. Please don't worry about it. Please don't think about it." I kiss him. He closes his eyes and groans and reciprocates, pushing me down into the mattress, his hands clasping my chin. And soon we're lost… lost in each other again.

Chapter 100/13

When I wake before the alarm the following morning Edward is wrapped around me like ivy, his head on my chest, his arm around my waist and his leg between mine – and he's on my side of the bed. It's always the same – provided I wake first, of course. If we argue the night before, this is how he ends up, coiled around me, making me hot… and bothered. Oh, Fifty. He is so needy on some level. Who would have thought? The familiar vision haunts me, of Edward as a dirty, wretched little boy. Gently I stroke his hair, and smile, my melancholy receding. It's shorter now. He stirs, and sleepy, clear, bright green eyes meet mine. He blinks a couple of times as he fully wakes.

"Hi," he murmurs, and smiles.

"Hi." I beam back at him. I love waking to that smile.

He nuzzles my breasts and hums appreciatively deep in his throat. His hand travels down from my waist, skimming over the cool satin of my nightgown.

"What a tempting morsel you are," he breathes. "But, tempting though you are –" he glances at the alarm – "I have to get up." He stretches out, untangling himself from me, and rises. I lie back and enjoy the show – Edward stripping for his shower. He is perfect. I wouldn't change a hair on his head… well, except when his hair gets too long.

I put my hands behind my head.

"Admiring the view, Mrs Cullen?" Edward arches a sardonic brow at me.

"It's a mighty fine view, Mr Cullen."

He grins and throws his PJs at me so they almost land on my face, but I catch them in time, giggling like a schoolgirl. With a wicked grin on his face he reaches down, pulls the duvet off me, puts one knee on the bed and grabs my ankles, pulling me towards him so that my nightdress rides up. I squeal, and he crawls up my body, trailing his nose and dropping little kisses, at my knee, my thigh… my… oh… *Edward!*

~o~

"Good morning, Mrs Cullen," Mrs Cope greets me. I flush, remembering her tryst with Taylor the night before.

"Good morning," I mutter, as she hands me a cup of tea. I'm hoping she'll think nothing of my blush. The breakfast bar is set for two, and I scoot up onto the bar stool beside my

delicious husband, who just looks radiant; freshly showered, his hair damp, wearing a crisp white shirt and that grey tie… my favorite tie. I have fond memories of that tie.

"How are you, Mrs Cullen?" he asks softly, his eyes warm.

"I think you know, Mr Cullen." I gaze up at him through my lashes.

He smirks at me.

"Eat," he orders. "You didn't eat yesterday."

Oh, bossy Fifty!

"That's because you were being an arse."

Mrs Cope drops something that clatters into the sink, making me jump. Edward seems oblivious to the noise. Ignoring her he gazes at me impassively.

"Arse or not. Eat." His tone is very serious. No arguing with him.

"Okay! Picking up spoon, eating granola," I mutter, like a petulant teenager. I reach for the Greek yoghurt and spoon some onto my cereal, followed by a handful of blueberries. I glance at Mrs Cope and she catches my eye. I smile, and she responds with a warm smile of her own. She got the yoghurt for me – it was my breakfast of choice on our honeymoon. I tuck into my food. I am famished – Jeez, if he just could keep his hands off me I'm sure I wouldn't be this hungry. My subconscious raises a skeptical eyebrow. Okay, okay – so I can't keep my hands off him either. I glance at him. Can you blame me? My inner goddess shakes her head emphatically.

"I may have to go to New York later in the week." Edward interrupts my reverie.

"Oh."

"It'll mean an overnight. I want you to come with me."

Oh no…

"Edward, I won't get the time off."

He raises an eyebrow at me. I sigh.

"I know you own the company, but I've been away for three weeks, Edward. Please. How can you expect me to run the business if I'm never there? I'll be fine here. I'm assuming you'll take Taylor with you – but Stuart and Ryan will be here."

I stop, because Edward is grinning at me.

"What?" I snap.

"Nothing. Just you," he says.

I frown at him. Is he laughing at me? Then a nasty thought pops into my mind.

"How are you getting to New York?" I whisper.

"The company jet, why?" His brow is furrowed – he's derailed by my question.

"I just wanted to check if you were taking Echo Charlie." My voice is quiet, and a shiver runs down my spine. I remember the last time he flew his helicopter. A wave of nausea hits me as I recall the anxious hours I spent waiting for news. That was possibly the lowest point in my life. I notice Mrs Cope has stilled too. I try and dismiss the idea.

"I wouldn't fly to New York in Echo Charlie. She's doesn't have that kind of range. Besides, she won't be back from the engineers for another two weeks."

Oh… thank heavens. I can't help my smile. It's partly relief, but also the knowledge that the demise of Echo Charlie has occupied a great deal of Edward's thoughts and time over the last few weeks.

"Well I'm glad she's nearly fixed, but –" I stop. Can I tell him how nervous I'll be when he flies next time?

"What?" he asks, as he finishes his omelet.

I shrug.

"Bella?" he says, more sternly.

"I just… you know. Last time you flew in her – I thought, we thought, you'd…" I can't finish the sentence, and Edward's expression softens.

"Hey." He reaches up to caress my face with the back of his knuckles. "That was sabotage." A dark expression crosses his face and for a moment I wonder if he knows who was responsible.

"I couldn't bear to lose you," I murmur.

"Five people have been fired because of that, Bella. It won't happen again."

"Five?"

He nods, his face serious.

Holy Crow!

"That reminds me. There's a gun in your desk."

He frowns at my non sequitur, and probably at my accusatory tone, though I don't mean it that way.

"It's Lauren's," he says finally, his eyes growing wide and wary.

"It's fully loaded."

"How do you know?" His frown deepens.

"I checked it yesterday."

He scowls at me.

"I don't know how I feel about you messing with guns. I hope you put the safety back on."

I blink at him, momentarily stupefied.

"Edward, there's no safety on that revolver. Don't you know anything about guns?"

His eyes widen.

"Um… no."

Taylor coughs discreetly from the entrance. Edward nods at him.

"We have to go," Edward says. He stands, distracted, and slips on his grey jacket. I follow him into the hallway. *He has Lauren's gun.* I am reeling from this news… and briefly I wonder what's happened to her. Is she still in – where is it? East somewhere. New Hampshire? I can't remember.

"Good morning, Taylor," Edward says.

"Good morning Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen." He nods at us both, but he's careful not to look me in the eye. I'm grateful, recalling my state of deshabille when we bumped into each other last night.

"I am just going to do my teeth," I mutter. Edward always brushes his teeth before breakfast. I don't understand why.

-

"You should ask Taylor to teach you how to shoot," I say as we travel down in the elevator. Edward gazes down at me, amused.

"Should I?" he says dryly.

"Yes."

"Isabella, I despise guns. My Dad has patched up so many victims of gun crime – I grew up with his anti-gun ethos. I support at least two gun control initiatives here in Washington."

"Oh. Does Taylor carry a gun?"

Edward's lips press into a hard line.

"Sometimes."

The elevator doors open and we're on the ground floor.

"You don't approve?" I ask, as Edward ushers me out of the elevator.

"No," he says, tight-lipped. "Let's just say that Taylor and I hold very different views with regard to gun control." I arch my brow at him. I am with Taylor on this.

Edward holds the foyer door open for me and I head out to the car. He has not let me drive alone to SIP since Echo Charlie's demise was discovered to be sabotage. Stuart smiles pleasantly, holding the door open for me as Edward and I climb into the car.

"Please." I reach across and grasp Edward's hand.

"Please what?"

"Learn how to shoot."

He rolls his eyes at me.

"No. End of discussion, Isabella."

And I am a child again, to be scolded. I open my mouth to say something cutting, but decide I don't want to start my workday in a bad mood. I fold my arms instead, and glimpse Taylor regarding me in the rear view mirror. He looks away, concentrating on the road in front, but shakes his head slightly, in obvious frustration. Hmm… Edward drives him crazy too, sometimes. The thought makes me smile, and my mood is saved.

"Where is Lauren?" I ask, as Edward gazes out of his window.

"I told you. She's in Connecticut with her folks." He glances at me.

"Did you check? After all, she does have long hair. It could have been her driving the Dodge."

"Yes, I checked. She's enrolled at an art school in Hamden. She started this week."

On no! My world falls away.

"You've spoken to her?" I whisper, all the blood draining from my face.

Edward's head whips round at the tone of my voice.

"No. Banner has," he says. He gazes intently at me, searching my face for a clue to my thoughts.

"I see," I murmur, relieved.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Edward sighs.

"Bella. What is it?"

I shrug, not wanting to admit to my irrational jealousy. Edward continues,

"I'm keeping tabs on her, checking that she stays on her side of the continent. She's better, Bella. Banner has referred her to a psych in New Haven, and all the reports are very positive. She's always been interested in art – so…" He stops, his face still searching mine. And in that moment I suspect that he is paying for her art classes. Do I want to know? Should I ask him? I mean it's not like he can't afford it – but why does he feel the obligation? I sigh. Edward's baggage… it hardly compares to Peter Paton from biology class, and his half-assed attempts to kiss me. Edward reaches for my hand.

"Don't sweat this, Isabella," he murmurs, and I return his reassuring squeeze. I know he's doing what he thinks is right.

Taylor pulls up outside SIP, and Stuart leaps out of the car to open my door. Edward pulls me towards him and kisses me quickly.

"Have a great day at work," he breathes.

"You too. And if you are going to come and throw your weight around here today, please call ahead so I can prepare myself." I smile sweetly at him.

Edward smirks.

"I'll see what I can do, Mrs Cullen. Think of me."

I blink at him.

"Always, Mr Cullen," I smile shyly at him, and he grins back. Jeez, he's adorable sometimes. I scramble out of the car and into the building, Stuart at my heels.

~o~

Mid morning I have a break in meetings. As I pick up the phone to call Rose I notice an email from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Flattery
Date: 25 August 2009: 09.54
To: Isabella Swan

Mrs Cullen
I have received three compliments on my new haircut. Compliments from my staff are new. It must be the ridiculous smile I'm wearing whenever I think about last night. You are indeed a wonderful, talented, beautiful woman.
And all mine.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I melt reading it.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Trying to concentrate here

Date: 25 August 2009: 10.48
To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen
I am trying to work and don't want to be distracted by delicious memories. Is now the time to confess that I used to cut my father's hair regularly? I had no idea it would stand me in such good stead.
And yes I am yours and you, my dear over-bearing husband who refuses to exercise his constitutional right under the second amendment to bear arms, are mine. But don't worry because I shall protect you. Always.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Annie Oakley
Date: 25 August 2009: 10.53
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
I am delighted to see you have spoken to the IT dept and changed your name. 😀
I shall sleep safe in my bed knowing that my gun-toting wife sleeps beside me.

Edward Cullen
CEO & Hoplophobe, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Hoplophobe? What the hell is that?

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Long words
Date: 25 August 2009: 10.58
To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen
Once more you dazzle me with your linguistic prowess.
In fact your prowess in general, and I think you know what I'm referring to.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Gasp!
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.01
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
Are you flirting with me?

Edward Cullen
Shocked CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Would you rather…
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.04
To: Edward Cullen

I flirted with someone else?

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Grrrrr
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.09
To: Isabella Cullen

NO!

Edward Cullen
Possessive CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: !
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.14
To: Edward Cullen

Are you growling at me? Cos that's kinda hot.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Beware
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.16
To: Isabella Cullen

Flirting and toying with me Mrs Cullen?
I may pay you a visit this afternoon.

Edward Cullen
Priapic CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Oh No!
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.20
To: Edward Cullen

I'll behave. I wouldn't want my boss's boss's boss getting on top of me at work.
Now let me get on with my job. My boss's boss's boss may fire my ass.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: &*%$&*&*
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.23
To: Isabella Cullen

Believe me when I say there are a great many things he'd like to do to your ass right now.
Firing it and you is not one of them.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Go Away!
Date: 25 August 2009: 11.26
To: Edward Cullen

Don't you have an empire to run?
Stop bothering me.
My next appointment is here.
Think about my ass, and I'll think about yours.
ILY x

Isabella Cullen
Now Moist Commissioning Editor, SIP

~ooo0O0ooo~

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Miss you already
Date: 27 August 2009: 04.32
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
You were adorable this morning.
Behave while I'm away.
I love you.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Edward's email is waiting for me when I arrive at work on Thursday. His threatened business trip to New York has happened, and this will be the first night we've slept apart since the night before our wedding. I intend to have a few cocktails with Rose – that should help me sleep. Impulsively I email him back, although I know that he's still flying.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Behave Yourself!
Date: 27 August 2009: 09.03
To: Edward Cullen

Let me know when you land – I'll worry until you do.
And I shall behave. I mean how much trouble can I get into with Rose?

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

I hit send and sip my latte, courtesy of Hanna. Who knew I'd grow to love coffee? In spite of the fact that I'm going out this evening with Rose, I feel like a chunk of me is missing. It's somewhere in American air space at the moment, en route to New York. I didn't know I could feel this unsettled and anxious just because Edward's away. Surely over time I won't feel this loss and uncertainty… will I? I let out a heavy sigh and continue with my work.

Around lunchtime I start manically checking my email and my BlackBerry for a text. Where is he? Has he landed safely? Hanna asks if I want lunch but I'm too apprehensive and I wave her away. I know it's irrational, but I need to be sure he's arrived safely.

My office phone rings, startling me.

"Bella Sw– Cullen," I answer, stumbling over my name again.

"Hi." Edward's voice is warm, with a trace of amusement. Relief floods through me.

"Hi," I respond, grinning from ear to ear. "How was your flight?"

"Long. What are you doing with Rose?"

Oh no.

"We're just going out for a quiet drink."

Edward says nothing.

"Stuart and the new girl – Jones – are coming, to watch over us," I offer, trying to placate him.

"I thought Rose was coming to the apartment."

"She is, after a quick drink." *Please let me go out!*

Edward sighs heavily.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he says quietly. Too quietly.

I mentally kick myself.

"Edward, we'll be fine. I have Ryan, Stuart and Jones here. It's only a quick drink."

Edward remains resolutely silent, and I know he's not happy.

"I've only seen her three times since you and I met. Please. She's my best friend."

"Bella, I don't want to keep you from your friends. But I thought she was coming back to the apartment."

"Okay," I acquiesce. "We'll stay in."

"Only while this lunatic is out there. Please."

"I've said okay," I mutter in exasperation, rolling my eyes.

Edward snorts softly down the phone.

"I always know when you're rolling your eyes at me."

I scowl at the receiver.

"Look, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. I'll tell Rose."

"Good," he breathes, and I can hear his relief. I feel like a complete heel for worrying him.

"Where are you?"

"On the tarmac at JFK."

"Oh, so you just landed."

"Yes. You asked me to call the moment I landed."

I smile. My subconscious glares at me – *See?* He does what he says he's going to do.

"Well Mr Cullen, I'm glad one of us is punctilious."

He laughs.

"Mrs Cullen, your gift for hyperbole knows no bounds. What am I going to do with you?"

"I am sure you'll think of something imaginative. You usually do."

"Are you flirting with me?"

"Yes."

I sense his grin.

"I'd better go. Bella, do as you're told, please. The security team knows what they're doing."

"Yes, Edward, I will." I sound exasperated again – but Jeez, I get the message.

"I'll see you tomorrow evening. I'll call you later."

"To check up on me?"

"Yes."

"Oh Edward!" I scold him.

"Au revoir, Mrs Cullen."

"Au revoir, Edward. I love you."

He inhales sharply.

"And I you, Bella."

Neither of us hang up.

"Hang up, Edward," I whisper.

"You're a bossy little thing aren't you?"

"Your bossy little thing."

"Mine," he breathes. "Do as you're told. Hang up."

"Yes, sir." I hang up and grin stupidly at the phone.

A few moments later an email appears in my in box.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Twitching Palms
Date: 27 August 2009: 13.42 EST
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
You are as entertaining as ever on the phone.

I mean it. Do as you're told.
I need to know you're safe.
I love you.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

Honestly, he's the bossy one. But one phone call and all my anxiety has disappeared. He's arrived safely and he's fussing about me as usual. I hug myself momentarily. God, I love my man. Hanna knocks on my door, distracting me, and I land back with a thump in my office.

~o~

Rose looks gorgeous. In her tight white jeans and red camisole she's ready to rock the town. She's chatting animatedly to Claire in reception when I make my entrance.

"Bella!" she cries, scooping me up in a Rose hug. She holds me at arm's length.

"Don't you look the mogul's wife?" she breathes. "Who would have thought, little Bella Swan? You look so… sophisticated!" She grins. I flush and roll my eyes at her. I am wearing a pale cream shift dress with a navy belt and navy pumps.

"It's good to see you, Rose." I hug her back.

"So, where are we going?"

"Edward wants us to go back to the apartment."

"Aw, really? Can't we sneak a quick cocktail at the Zig Zag Cafe? I've booked us a table."

I open my mouth to protest.

"Please?" she whines and pouts prettily. She must be picking this up from Alice – she never pouts, normally. I'd really like a cocktail at the Zig Zag. We had such fun the last time we went there, and it's close to Rose's apartment…

I hold up my index finger.

"One."

She grins.

"One," she agrees, beaming at me. She links her arm in mine and we make our way out to the car, which is parked at the curb, Stuart at the wheel. We're followed out by Miss Samantha Jones. She's new to the security team – a tall African-American with a no-nonsense attitude. I've yet to warm to her, maybe because she's too cool and professional. The jury's definitely out, but like the rest of the team she's been hand-picked by Taylor. She's dressed like Stuart, in a dark somber pant suit.

"Can you take us to the Zig Zag, please Stuart?"

Stuart turns to look at me, and I know he wants to say something. He's obviously been given his orders. He hesitates.

"The Zig Zag Café. We'll only have one."

I give Rose a sideways glance and she's glaring at Stuart. Poor man.

"As you wish, ma'am."

"Mr Cullen requested you go back to the apartment," Jones pipes up.

"Mr Cullen isn't here," I snap. "The Zig Zag, please."

"Ma'am," Stuart replies, with a sideways glance at Jones, who wisely holds her tongue.

Rose gapes at me as if she can't believe her eyes and ears. I flush and shrug. Okay, so I'm a little more assertive than I used to be. Rose nods in approval as Stuart pulls out into the early evening traffic.

"You know the additional security is driving Esme and Alice crazy," Rose says casually.

What? I gawk at her, baffled.

"You didn't know?" She seems incredulous.

"Know what?"

"Security for all of the Cullens has been tripled. Gazillioned, even."

"Really?"

"He hasn't told you?"

I flush.

"No." *Why wouldn't Edward tell me?* "Do you know why?"

"James Smith," says Rose, by way of explanation.

"What about James? I thought he was just after Edward," I breathe. Jeez – why hasn't he told me?

"Since Monday," Rose says.

Last Monday? Hmm… we identified James on Sunday. But why all the Cullens? I am reeling. *What's going on?*

"How do you know all this?"

"Emmett."

Of course.

"Edward hasn't told you any of this, has he?"

I flush once more.

"No."

"Oh Bella, how annoying."

I sigh. As ever, Rose has hit the nail squarely on the head – in her usual sledgehammer style.

"Do you know why?" I ask. If Edward's not going to tell me, then maybe Rose will.

"Emmett said it's something to do with information stored on James Smith's computer when he was at SIP."

Holy Crap.

"You're kidding." And I feel a surge of anger pulse through me. How does Rose know about this when I don't?

I glance up to see Stuart eyeing me from the rear view mirror. The red light turns to green and he surges forward, focusing on the road ahead. I hold my finger up to my lips and Rose nods. Stuart probably knows, and I don't.

"How's Emmett?" I ask. Rose grins, stupidly, telling me all I need to know, and I grin with her.

Stuart pulls up at the end of the passageway that leads down to the Zig Zag Café and Jones opens my door. I scoot out and Rose scrambles out after me. We link arms and stroll down the passage, followed by Jones, who's wearing a thunderous expression on her face. Oh for heaven's sake – it's just a drink. Stuart heads off to park the car.

~o~

"So how does Emmett know Tanya?" I ask, taking a sip of my second cosmopolitan. The bar is intimate and cozy, and I don't want to leave. Rose and I have not stopped talking. I had forgotten how much I like hanging with her. It's so liberating to be out, relaxing, enjoying Rose's company. I contemplate texting Edward, then dismiss the idea. He'll just be mad, and make me go home like an errant child.

"Don't talk to me about that bitch!" Rose splutters.

I can't help it. Rose's reaction makes me laugh.

"What's so funny, Swan?" she snaps, but not seriously.

"I feel the same way."

"You do?"

"Yes. She was all over Edward."

"She had a fling with Emmett." Rose pouts.

"No!" I gasp.

She nods, her lips pressed together in the patented Rosalie Hale scowl.

"It was brief. Last year, I think. She's a social climber. No wonder she has her sights set on Edward."

"Edward is taken. I told her to leave him alone or I would fire her."

Rose gapes at me once more, stunned. I nod proudly, and she lifts her glass to salute me, impressed and beaming.

"Mrs Isabella Cullen! Way to go!" We clink.

~o~

“Does Emmett own a gun?”

“No. He’s very anti-gun.” Rose stirs her third drink.

“Edward too. I think it was Carlisle’s influence,” I mutter.

I’m feeling a little tipsy.

“Carlisle’s a good man.” Rose mutters.

“He wanted a pre-nup,” I mutter sadly.

“Oh, Bella.” She reaches across and grasps my arm. “He was only looking out for his boy. As we both know, you have gold-digger tattooed on your forehead.” She smiles at me, and I poke my tongue out at her.

“Mature, Mrs Cullen,” she says grinning. She sounds like Edward. “You’ll do the same for your son one day.”

“My son?” I blink at her. It hadn’t even crossed my mind that my kids will be rich. Holy crap… They’ll want for nothing. I mean… nothing. This needs further thought – but not right now. I glance at Jones and Stuart, seated nearby, watching us and the evening crowd from a side table, each nursing a glass of sparkling mineral water.

“Do you think we should eat?” I ask.

“No. We should drink,” Rose says.

“Why are you in such a drinking mood?”

“Because I don’t see you enough anymore. I didn’t know you’d up and marry the first guy who turned your head.” She pouts again. “Honestly, you married with such indecent haste, I thought you were pregnant.”

I giggle.

“Everyone thought I was pregnant,” I mutter. “Let’s not rehash that conversation again. Please! And I have to use the restroom.”

Jones accompanies me. She says nothing. She doesn’t have to. Disapproval radiates off her like a lethal isotope.

"I haven't been out on my own since I got married," I mutter wordlessly at the closed toilet door. I make a face, knowing that she's standing on the other side of the door, waiting, while I pee. What precisely is Smith going to do in a bar anyway? Edward is just over-reacting as usual.

~o~

"Rose, it's late. We should go."

It's 10.15 and I have sunk my fourth cosmopolitan. I am definitely feeling the effects of the alcohol… warm and fuzzy. Edward will be fine… Eventually. I know.

"Sure, Bella. It's been so good to see you. You just seem so much more… I don't know… Confident. Marriage obviously agrees with you."

I flush. Coming from Miss Rosalie Hale, this is indeed a compliment.

"It does," I whisper, and because I've probably had too much to drink, tears prick the back of my eyes. Could I be any happier? In spite of all his baggage, his nature, his Fiftyness, I have met and married the man of my dreams. I quickly change the subject to stem my sentimental thoughts, because I know I will cry otherwise.

"I have really enjoyed this evening." I grasp Rose's hand. "Thank you for dragging me out!" We hug. As she releases me I nod at Stuart, and he hands Jones the keys to the car. She leaves to fetch it.

"I'm sure Miss Goody-Two-Shoes Jones has told Edward I'm not at home. He'll be mad," I mutter to Rose. And maybe he'll think of some delicious way to punish me… hopefully.

"Why are you grinning like a loon, Bella? You like making Edward mad?"

"No. Not really. But it's hard not to. He's very controlling sometimes." *Most of the time.*

"I've noticed," Rose says wryly.

~o~

We pull up outside Rose's apartment. She hugs me hard.

"Don't be a stranger," she whispers, and kisses my cheek. Then she's out of the car. I wave at her, feeling strangely homesick. I have missed this. Girl talk. It's fun and relaxing, and it makes me feel young and carefree. I must make more of an effort to see Rose… but the truth is, I love being in my bubble with Edward. Last night we attended a charity dinner together. There were so many men in suits and well-groomed elegant

women talking about real estate prices, and sub prime mortgages, and toxic debt… I mean it was dull, really dull. It's refreshing to let my hair down with someone my own age.

My stomach rumbles. Jeez, I still haven't eaten. Shit – Edward! I scramble through my purse and fish out my BlackBerry. Holy crap – five missed calls! One text…

WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU?

And one email…

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Angry. You've not seen angry
Date: 28 August 2009: 00.42 EST
To: Isabella Cullen

Isabella
Stuart tells me that you are drinking cocktails in a bar when you said you wouldn't.
Do you have any idea how mad I am at the moment?
I'll see you tomorrow.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

-

My heart sinks. Oh shit! I really am in trouble. My subconscious glares at me, then shrugs, wearing her you-made-your-bed-you-lie-in-it face. What did I expect? I contemplate calling him, but it's late and he's probably asleep… or pacing. I decide a quick text may be enough.

STILL IN ONE PIECE. MISSING YOU – PLEASE DON'T BE MAD

I gaze at my BlackBerry, willing him to respond, but it's ominously silent. I sigh.

Jones pulls up outside Escala and Stuart clambers out to hold the door open for me. As we stand waiting for the elevator I take the opportunity to quiz him.

"What time did Edward call you?"

Stuart flushes slightly.

"About 9:30, ma'am."

I nod.

"Why didn't you interrupt my conversation with Rose so I could speak with him?"

"Mr Cullen told me not to."

I purse my lips. The elevator arrives, and we ride up in silence. I am suddenly grateful that Edward has a whole night to recover from his snit – and that he's on the other side of America. It gives me some time.

The doors to the elevator open, and for a split second I stare at the foyer table, wondering – what is wrong with this picture? The vase of flowers lies smashed into fragments all over the floor of the foyer, water and flowers and chunks of china are strewn everywhere, and the table is overturned. Stuart grabs my arm and pulls me back into the elevator.

"Stay there!" he hisses, drawing a gun. He steps into the foyer and disappears from my field of vision.

Oh no! I cower in the back of the elevator. What's going on?

"Ethan!" I hear Ryan call from inside the great room. "Code Blue!"

Code blue?

"You have the perp?" Stuart calls back. "Jesus H Christ!"

I flatten myself against the elevator wall. What the hell is happening? Adrenaline spikes through my body, and my heart leaps into my throat. I can hear talking – soft voices – and a moment later Stuart reappears in the foyer, standing in the puddle of water. He is re-holstering his gun.

"You can come in, Mrs Cullen," he says gently.

"What's happened, Ethan?" My voice is barely a whisper.

"We've had a visitor." He takes my elbow, and I'm grateful for the support – my legs have turned to jelly. I walk with him through the open double doors.

Ryan is standing at the entrance of the great room. A cut above his eye is bleeding, and there's another on his mouth. He looks roughed up, his clothes disheveled. But more shockingly, slumped at his feet is Mr James Smith.

Chapter 101/14

“Is he–?” I gasp, unable to finish the sentence, as I gaze wide-eyed and terrified at Ryan. I can barely bring myself to look at the prone figure on the floor. My heart is pounding and I can hear the blood pulse in my eardrums. The alcohol flowing through my system enhances the sound.

“No ma’am, just knocked out cold.”

Relief floods through me. Oh thank God.

“And you?” I ask, gazing at Ryan. I realize I don’t know his first name. He’s panting as if he’s run a marathon. He wipes the corner of his mouth, removing the trace of blood, and a faint bruise is forming on his cheek.

“He put up one hell of a fight, but I’m good, Mrs Cullen.” He smiles reassuringly at me. If I knew him better I’d say he looks a trifle smug.

“And Gail? Mrs Cope?” Oh no… is she okay? Has she been harmed?

“I’m here, Bella,” says Mrs Cope, behind me. Glancing quickly back, I see she’s in a nightdress and robe, her hair loose, her face ashen and her eyes wide… like mine, I imagine.

“Ryan woke me. Insisted I come in here.” She points behind her into Taylor’s office. “I’m fine. Are you okay?” she breathes.

I nod briskly, and I realize she’s probably just come out of the panic room, built adjoining Taylor’s office. Who knew we’d need it so soon? Edward had insisted on its installation shortly after our engagement – and I had rolled my eyes at him. Now, seeing Gail standing in the doorway, I feel grateful for his foresight.

A creak from the door to the foyer distracts me. It’s hanging off its hinges. What the hell happened to that?

“Was he alone?” I ask Ryan.

“Yes ma’am. You wouldn’t be standing here if he wasn’t, I can assure you.” Ryan sounds vaguely affronted.

“How did he get in?” I ask, ignoring his tone.

“Through the service elevator. Bold as brass, ma’am.”

I stare down at James’s slumped figure. He’s wearing a uniform of sorts – coveralls, I think.

“When?”

“About ten minutes ago. I caught him on the CCTV. He was wearing gloves… kinda strange in August, ma’am. I recognized him and decided to give him access. That way I knew we’d have him. You weren’t here ma’am, and Gail was safe, so I figured it was now or never.” Ryan looks very pleased with himself once more, and Stuart scowls at him in disapproval.

Gloves? The thought distracts me, and I glance once more at James. Yes, he’s wearing brown leather gloves. Creepy.

“What now?” I breathe, trying to dismiss the ramifications from my mind.

“Time to call the police and the paramedics, let them do their thing. I want to secure him first,” Ryan replies.

“Secure him?”

“In case he wakes.” Ryan glances anxiously at Stuart.

“What do you need?” asks Mrs Cope, stepping forward. She’s recovered her composure.

“Something to restrain him – cord, or rope,” Ryan replies.

Cable ties. I flush as memories of the previous night invade my mind. Reflexively I rub my wrists and glance quickly down at them. No, no bruising. Good.

“I have something. Cable ties. Will they do?”

All eyes turn to me.

“Yes ma’am. Perfect,” Stuart says, serious and straight-faced.

I want the floor to swallow me up, but I turn and head for our bedroom. Sometimes you just have to brazen things out… perhaps it’s the combination of fear and alcohol making me audacious.

When I return Mrs Cope is surveying the mess in the foyer, and Miss Jones has joined the security team. I hand the cable ties to Stuart, who slowly and with frankly unnecessary care ties Smith's hands behind his back. Mrs Cope disappears into the kitchen and returns with a small first aid kit. She takes Ryan's arm, leads him into the doorway of the great room and starts tending to the cut above his eye. He flinches as she dabs it with an antiseptic wipe. Then I notice the Glock on the floor… with a silencer attached. Holy Shit! James was armed? Bile rises in my throat and I fight it down.

"Don't touch, Mrs Cullen," says Jones, when I bend to pick it up. Stuart emerges from Taylor's office wearing latex gloves.

"I'll take care of that, Mrs Cullen," he says.

"It's his?" I ask.

"Yes ma'am," says Ryan, wincing once more from Mrs Cope's ministrations. Holy crap. Ryan fought an armed man, in my home. I shudder at the thought. Stuart bends and picks up the Glock. Charlie has one, I remember, and I think I snort. Yes – snorting is good. Removing the silencer Stuart slides it and the gun into a zip-lock bag, then squats to pat down James. He pauses, and out of James' pocket he pulls a roll of duct tape. Stuart blanches, and places the tape into another zip-lock bag. Why duct tape? I think idly, watching the proceedings with fascination and an odd detachment. Then bile rises to my throat again at the implications. I rapidly dismiss them from my head. Don't go there, Bella!

"Should we call the police?" I mutter, trying to hide my fear. I want Smith out of my home, sooner rather than later.

Ryan and Stuart glance nervously at each other.

"I think we should call the police," I say rather more forcefully, wondering why Ryan and Stuart look suddenly nervous.

"I've just tried Taylor and he's not answering his cell. Maybe he's asleep." Stuart checks his watch. "It's 1:45 am on the East Coast."

Oh no.

"Have you called Edward?" I whisper.

"No ma'am."

"Were you calling Taylor for instructions?"

Stuart looks momentarily embarrassed.

"Yes ma'am."

Part of me bristles. This man – I glance down at Smith again – has invaded my house, and he needs to be removed by the police. As a cop's daughter I don't understand their ambivalence. But looking at the four of them, into their anxious eyes, I decide I should call Edward. My scalp prickles. I know he's mad at me – really, really mad at me – and I quail at the thought of what he'll say. And how he'll stress because he's not here, and can't be here until tomorrow evening. Part of me feels I've worried him enough this evening. Perhaps I shouldn't call him. And then it occurs to me: Shit – If I'd been here? I pale at the thought. Thank heavens I was out. Maybe I won't be in so much trouble after all.

"Is he okay?" I ask, pointing at James.

"He'll have an aching skull when he wakes," Ryan says, gazing down at James with contempt. "But we need paramedics here to make sure."

I reach into my purse and pull out my BlackBerry, and before I can give too much thought to the extent of Edward's anger, I dial his number. It goes straight to voice mail – he must have switched it off because he's so mad. I cannot think what to say. Turning away I walk down the hallway a little, away from everyone.

"Hi. It's me. Please don't be mad. We've had an incident at the apartment. But it's under control, so don't worry. No one is hurt. Call me." I hang up.

"Call the police." I tell Stuart. He nods, takes out his cell, and makes the call.

~o~

Officer Skinner is deep in conversation with Ryan at the dining room table. Officer Walker is with Stuart in Taylor's office. I don't know where Jones is… perhaps in Taylor's office. Detective Clark is barking questions at me as we sit on the couch in the great room. He's tall, blond and would be good looking if it wasn't for his permanent scowl. I suspect he's been woken and dragged from his warm bed because the home of one of Seattle's most influential and wealthy businessmen has been breached.

"He used to be your boss?" Clark asks tersely.

"Yes."

I am tired – beyond tired – and I want to go to bed. I still haven't heard from Edward. On the plus side, Smith has been taken away by the paramedics, accompanied by Skinner's colleague Officer Lee. Mrs Cope hands me and Detective Clark each a cup of tea.

"Thanks," grunts Clark, and turns back to me. "And where is Mr Cullen?"

"New York. On business. He'll be back tomorrow evening… I mean this evening." It's after midnight.

"Smith is known to us," Detective Clark murmurs. "I'll need you to come down to the station house to make a statement. But that can wait. It's late and there are a couple of reporters camped out on the sidewalk. Do you mind if I look around?"

"Of course not," I offer, relieved his questioning is finished. I shudder at the thought of the paps outside. Well, they won't be a problem until tomorrow. I remind myself to call my Mom and Charlie, just in case they hear anything and worry.

"Mrs Cullen, may I suggest you go to bed?" Mrs Cope asks softly.

I look up at Gail, into her warm, kind eyes, and suddenly feel an overwhelming need to cry. She reaches over and rubs my shoulder.

"We're safe now," she murmurs. "This will all look better in the morning, once you've had some sleep. And Mr Cullen will be back tomorrow evening," she continues. I glance nervously up at her, keeping my tears at bay. Edward is going to be so mad.

"Can I get you anything before you go to bed?" she asks.

What? And in that moment, I realize how hungry I am.

"I'd love something to eat," I whisper.

She smiles broadly.

"Sandwich and some milk?"

I nod in gratitude and she heads towards the kitchen. Ryan is still with Officer Skinner. Beyond the door to the foyer that still hangs off its hinges I can see Detective Clark examining the mess outside the elevator. He looks thoughtful, in spite of his scowl. And suddenly I feel homesick – homesick for Edward. I wish he were here. I put my head in my hands. What an evening. I want to crawl into Edward's lap, to have him hold me and tell me that he loves me, even though I don't do as I'm told – but that won't be possible until this evening. Inwardly I roll my eyes… Why didn't he tell me about the Cullens' increased security? What exactly is on James's computer? Right now, I just don't care. I want my husband. I miss him.

“Here you are, Bella dear.” Mrs Cope interrupts my inner turmoil. When I glance up at her she hands me a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, her eyes twinkling, her smile benign. I haven’t had one of these for years. I smile shyly at her, and tuck in.

When I finally crawl into bed I curl up on Edward’s side, dressed in his T-shirt. Both his pillow and his T smell of him, and as I drift off I silently wish him safe passage home… and a good mood.

~o~

I wake with a start. It’s light and my head is aching, throbbing gently. Oh no. I hope I don’t have a hangover. Cautiously I open my eyes, and as they flutter open I notice the bedroom chair has moved, and Edward is seated in it. He’s wearing his tux, and the end of his bowtie is peeping out of the breast pocket. Briefly I wonder if I’m dreaming. His left arm is draped over the chair, and in his hand he holds a cut glass tumbler of amber liquid… Brandy? Whiskey? I have no idea. One long leg is crossed at the ankle over his knee. He’s wearing black socks and dress shoes. His right elbow rests on the arm of the chair, his hand at his chin, and he’s slowly running his index finger rhythmically back and forth over his lower lip. His green eyes burn intensely in the early morning light, but his general expression is completely unreadable.

My heart almost stops. He’s here. How did he get here? He must have left New York last night. How long has he been here… watching me sleep?

“Hi,” I whisper.

He regards me coolly, and my stuttering heart stutters once more. Oh no. He moves his long fingers away from his mouth, tosses the remainder of his drink down his throat, reaches over and places the glass on the bedside table. I half expect him to kiss me, but he doesn’t. He sits back, continuing to regard me, his expression impassive.

“Hello,” he says finally, his voice hushed. And I know he’s still mad. Really mad.

“You’re back.”

“It would appear so.”

Slowly I pull myself up into a sitting position, not taking my eyes off him. My mouth is so dry.

“How long have you been sitting there watching me sleep?”

“Long enough.”

“You’re still mad.” I can hardly speak the words.

He gazes at me, as if considering his response.

“Mad,” he says, as if testing the word, weighing up its nuances, its meaning. “No, Bella. I am far, far beyond mad.”

Holy crap. I try to swallow, but it’s hard with such a dry mouth.

“Far beyond mad… that doesn’t sound good,” I breathe.

He gazes at me, completely impassive, and doesn’t respond. A stark silence stretches between us. I reach over to my glass of no-longer-quite-so-sparkling water and take a welcome sip, trying to bring my erratic heart rate under control.

“Ryan caught James.” I try a different tack and to give myself a moment of time, place my glass beside his on the bedside table.

“I know,” he says icily.

Of course he knows.

“Are you going to be monosyllabic for long?”

He blinks at me, as if he hadn’t expected this question.

“Yes,” he says finally.

Oh… okay. What to do? Defense – the best form of attack.

“I’m sorry I stayed out.”

“Are you?”

“No,” I mutter after a pause, because it’s true.

“Why say it then?”

“Because I missed you, and I’m glad you’re back.”

He sighs heavily, as if he’s been holding this tension for a thousand hours, and runs his hand through his hair. He looks beautiful. Mad, but beautiful. I drink him in, and it’s as if my prayers have been answered, and my dreams have come true. Edward’s back – angry, but here, in one piece.

“I think Detective Clark wants to talk to you.”

“I’m sure he does.”

“Edward, please…”

“Please what?”

“Don’t be so cold.”

His eyebrows rise slightly in surprise.

“Isabella, cold is not what I’m feeling at the moment. Red-hot. That might be close. Burning enraged hot might be closer still. I don’t know how to deal with these…” He waves his hand as if grasping for the word. “Feelings.”

Oh. His honesty disarms me. All I want to do is crawl into his lap. It’s all I’ve wanted to do since I came home last night. But right now, I don’t think it’s a good idea. Is it? To hell with this. I move, taking him completely by surprise, and clambering awkwardly into his lap, I curl up. He doesn’t push me away, which is what I’d feared. After a beat he folds his arms around me and buries his nose in my hair. He smells of whiskey. Jeez, has he drunk a lot? He smells of bodywash too… he smells of Edward. I wrap my arms around his neck and nuzzle his throat, and he sighs once more, more deeply this time.

“Oh, Mrs Cullen. What am I going to do with you?” He kisses the top of my head. I close my eyes, relishing the contact with him.

“How much have you had to drink?”

He stills.

“Why?”

“You don’t normally drink hard liquor.”

“This is my second glass. I’ve had a trying night, Isabella. Give a man a break.”

I smile.

“If you insist, Mr Cullen,” I breathe into his neck. “You smell heavenly. I slept on your side of the bed because your pillow smells of you.”

He nuzzles my hair.

“Did you now? I wondered why you were on this side. I’m still mad at you.”

“I know.”

His hand rhythmically strokes my back.

“And I’m mad at you,” I whisper.

He pauses.

“And what, pray, have I done to deserve your ire?”

“I’ll tell you later when you’re no longer burning enraged hot.” I kiss his throat. He closes his eyes and leans into my kiss, but makes no move to kiss me back. His arms tighten around me, squeezing me.

“When I think of what might have happened…” His voice is barely a whisper. Broken, raw.

“I’m okay,” I murmur against his throat.

“Oh, Bella.” It’s almost a sob.

“I’m okay. We’re all okay. A bit shaken. But Gail is fine. Ryan is fine. And James is gone.”

He shakes his head.

“No thanks to you,” he breathes.

What?

I push away, and glare at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want to argue about it right now, Bella.”

I blink. Well, maybe I do… but I decide against it. At least he’s talking to me.

I nestle into him once more. His fingers move to my hair and start playing with it.

“I want to beat the shit out of you,.” he says matter-of-factly after a while.

My heart leaps into my mouth. Fuck.

"I know," I whisper.

"Maybe I will."

"I hope not."

He hugs me tighter.

"Bella, Bella, Bella. You'd try the patience of a saint."

"I could accuse you of many things, Mr Cullen, but being a saint isn't one of them," I murmur. And finally I am blessed with his reluctant chuckle.

"Good point well made, as ever, Mrs Cullen." He kisses my forehead and shifts.

"Back into bed. You had a late night too." He moves quickly, picking me up and depositing me back on the bed.

"Will you come and lie down with me?"

"No. I have things to do." He reaches down and collects the glass. "Go back to sleep. I'll wake you in a couple of hours."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"Yes."

"I'll go back to sleep, then."

"Good." He pulls the duvet over me and kisses my forehead once more. "Sleep," he says.

And because I feel so groggy from the night before, and relieved that he's back, and because I'm emotionally fatigued by our early-morning encounter, I do exactly as I'm told. As I drift off I'm curious, though grateful, given my arid mouth, to know why he hasn't leapt on me and had his wicked way.

~o~

"There's some orange juice for you here," says Edward softly, and my eyes flutter open again. I have just had the most restful two hours of sleep I can remember, and I wake refreshed, my head no longer throbbing. The orange juice is a welcome sight – as is my husband. He's in his sweats. And I'm momentarily zapped back to the Heathman Hotel, and the first time I ever woke up with him. Either he's been working out in the basement

gym or he's been for a run, but his grey tank top is covered in sweat. He shouldn't look this good after a workout.

"I'm going to take a shower," he murmurs, and disappears to the bathroom. I frown. He's still so distant. He's either distracted by all that's happened, or still mad, or… what? I sit up and reach for the orange juice, swigging it down far too quickly. It's delicious, ice-cold, and it makes my mouth a much better place. Climbing out of bed I am anxious to close the distance – real and metaphysical – between me and my husband. I glance quickly at the alarm. It's 8.00 am. I strip off Edward's t-shirt and follow him into the bathroom. He's in the shower, washing his hair, and I don't hesitate. I clamber in behind him and wrap my arms around him – my front to his wet, muscular back. He stiffens immediately, but I ignore his reaction. Holding him tightly I press my cheek flat against him, closing my eyes. After a moment he shifts slightly so we are both under the cascade of hot water, and carries on washing his hair. I let the water wash over me as I cradle the man I love. I think of all the times he's fucked me, and all the times he's made love to me, in here. I frown. He's never been this quiet. Turning my head I start to trail kisses across his back. His body stiffens again.

"Bella," he warns.

"Hmmm."

My hands travel slowly down over his taut stomach to his belly. He places both his hands on mine and brings them to an abrupt halt. He shakes his head.

"Not now," he breathes.

Oh. I release him, immediately. He's saying no? My mind goes into freefall – has this ever happened before? My subconscious shakes her head, her lips pursed. She glares at me over her half-moon glasses, wearing her you've-really-fucked-this-up look. I feel like I've been slapped, hard. Rejected. And a lifetime of insecurity spawns the ugly thought: He doesn't want me anymore. Oh no…

I gasp as the pain sears through me. Edward turns, and I'm relieved to see he's not completely oblivious to my charms. Grasping my chin he tilts my head back and I find myself gazing into his wary, beautiful green eyes.

"I don't trust myself," he says, his voice quiet and serious.

Trust himself? With what? Leaning down he rests his forehead against mine, closing his eyes. Oh, Edward – what do you mean? I reach up and caress his face.

"I think you're over-reacting," I whisper.

He straightens, blanching, and gapes at me. And because he's moved, I drop my hand. Holy Crap.

"Over-reacting?," he gasps. "Some fucking lunatic gets into my apartment to kidnap my wife, and you think I'm over-reacting!?" The restrained menace in his voice is frightening, and his eyes blaze as he stares at me like I'm the fucking lunatic.

"No… um. That's not what I was referring to. I thought this was about me staying out."

He closes his eyes once more, as if in pain, and shakes his head.

"Edward, I wasn't here," I breathe, trying to appease and reassure him.

"I know," he whispers opening his eyes. "And all because you can't follow a simple, fucking request." His tone is bitter and it's my turn to blanch. "I don't want to discuss this now, in the shower. I am still fucking mad at you Isabella. You're making me question my judgment." He turns and promptly leaves the shower, grabbing a towel and stalking out of the bathroom, leaving me bereft under the shower..

Crap. Crap. Crap.

Then the significance of what he's just said dawns on me. Kidnap? Fuck. James wanted to kidnap me? I recall the duct tape, and not wanting to think too deeply about why James carried it. Does Edward have more information? Hurriedly I wash myself, then shampoo and rinse my hair. I want to know. I need to know. I am not going to let him keep me in the dark about this.

Edward's not in the bedroom when I come out. Jeez, he dresses quickly. I do the same, throwing on my favorite plum dress and black sandals, and I'm conscious that I've chosen this outfit because Edward likes it. I vigorously towel-dry my hair, then braid it and wind it into a bun. Fitting diamond studs into my ears, I dash to the bathroom to apply a little mascara. A quick glance in the mirror… I am pale. Jeez – I'm always pale. I take a deep steadying breath. I need to face the consequences of my rather rash decision to actually enjoy myself with my friend. I sigh… knowing that Edward won't see it that way.

Edward is nowhere to be seen in the great room. Mrs Cope is busying herself in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Bella," she says sweetly.

"Morning," I smile broadly at her. I am Bella again!

"Tea?"

"Please."

"Anything to eat?"

"Please. I'd like an omelet this morning."

"With mushrooms and spinach?"

"And cheese?"

"Coming up."

"Where's Edward?"

"Mr Cullen's in his study."

"Has he had breakfast?" I glance at the two places set on the breakfast bar.

"No, ma'am."

"Thanks."

Edward is on the phone, dressed in a white shirt with no tie, looking like a very relaxed CEO. How deceptive appearances can be. Perhaps he's not going into the office after all. He glances up when I appear in the doorway but shakes his head at me, indicating that I am not welcome. Shit… I turn and wander dejectedly back to the breakfast bar. Taylor appears, snappily dressed, looking like he's had eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

"Morning, Taylor," I murmur, trying to gauge his mood, and to see if he'll offer me any visual cues about what has been going on.

"Good morning, Mrs Cullen," he replies, and I can hear the sympathy in those four words. I smile compassionately back at him, knowing he had to endure an angry frustrated Edward returning to Seattle way ahead of schedule.

"How was the flight?" I dare to ask.

"Long, Mrs Cullen." His brevity speaks volumes. "May I ask how you are?" he adds, his tone softening.

"I'm good," I breathe.

He nods.

"If you'll excuse me." He heads towards Edward's study.

Hmmm. Taylor's allowed in, but not me.

"Here you go." Mrs Cope places my breakfast in front of me. My appetite has vanished, but I eat anyway, not wishing to offend her.

By the time I have eaten as much of my breakfast as I can manage, Edward has still not emerged from his study. Is he avoiding me?

"Thanks, Mrs Cope," I murmur, sliding off the bar stool and heading to the bathroom to clean my teeth. As I brush them I am reminded of Edward's sulk over the wedding vows. He holed up in his study then too. Is that what this is? We really need to talk. I need to know about James, and about the increased security for the Cullens – all the details that have been kept from me, but not from Rose. Obviously Emmett talks to her.

I glance at my watch. It's 8.50 – I'm late for work. I finish brushing my teeth, apply a little lip gloss, grab my lightweight black jacket and head back to the great room.

I am relieved to see Edward there, eating his breakfast.

"You're going?" he says when he sees me.

"To work? Yes, of course." Bravely I walk towards him and rest my hands on the edge of the breakfast bar. He gazes at me blankly.

"Edward, we've hardly been back a week. I have to go to work."

"But–" He stops, and rakes his hand through his hair.

Mrs Cope walks quietly out of the room. Discreet, Gail, discreet.

"I know we have a great deal to talk about, Edward. Perhaps if you've calmed down, we can do it this evening."

His mouth pops open slightly with shocked surprise.

"Calmed down?" His voice is eerily soft.

I flush.

"You know what I mean."

"No, Isabella, I don't know what you mean."

"I don't want a fight. I was coming to ask you if I could take my car."

"No. You can't," he snaps.

"Okay." I acquiesce immediately.

He blinks. He was obviously expecting a fight.

"Jones will accompany you." His tone is slightly less belligerent.

Dammit, not Jones. I want to pout and protest, but decide against it. Surely now James has been caught we can cut back on our security. I remember my Mom's 'words of wisdom' talk the day before my wedding. Bella honey, you really have to choose your battles. It'll be the same with your kids when you have them. Well, at least he's letting me go to work.

"Okay," I murmur. And because I don't want to leave him like this – with so much unresolved and so much tension between us – I step tentatively towards him. He stiffens, his eyes widening, and for a moment he looks so vulnerable it pulls at some deep, dark place in my heart – or is it my soul? Oh Edward, I am so sorry. I kiss him chastely on the side of his mouth. He closes his eyes, as if relishing my touch.

"Don't hate me," I whisper.

He grabs my hand.

"I don't hate you," he says, his eyes suddenly wide and wary.

"You haven't kissed me," I whisper.

He seems to sag slightly with relief.

"I know," he mutters.

I am desperate to ask him why, but I'm not sure I want to know the answer. He stands suddenly and grabs my face between his hands, and in a flash his lips are hard on mine. I gasp with surprise, inadvertently granting his tongue access. He takes full advantage, invading my mouth, claiming me… and just as I'm beginning to respond he releases me again, his breathing quickening.

"Taylor will take you and Jones to SIP," he says. His bold green eyes never leaving mine and flaring with need. "Taylor!" he calls. Whoa –that look. I know that look. I flush, trying to recover some composure.

"Sir." Taylor is standing in the doorway.

"Tell Jones Mrs Cullen is going to work. Can you drive them, please?"

“Certainly.” Turning on his heel Taylor disappears.

“If you could try to stay out of trouble today, I would appreciate it,” Edward mutters.

“I’ll see what I can do.” I smile sweetly.

A reluctant half smile tugs at Edward’s lips, but he doesn’t give in to it.

“I’ll see you later, then,” he says coolly.

“Laters,” I whisper.

Jones and I take the service elevator down to the basement garage in order to avoid the media outside. James’s arrest, and the fact he was apprehended in our apartment, is now public knowledge. As I clamber into the Merc I wonder if there will be more paparazzi waiting at SIP, like the day our engagement was announced.

We drive a while in silence, until I remember to call first Charlie and then my Mom to reassure them Edward and I are safe. Mercifully both calls are short and I hang up just as we arrive outside SIP. As I feared there’s a small crowd of reporters and photographers lying in wait. They turn as one, alerted to the Merc.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Mrs Cullen?” Taylor asks.

Part of me just wants to go home –but that means spending the day with Mr Burning Enraged. Hopefully, with a little time he will gain some perspective. James is in police custody, so Fifty should be happy –but he’s not… and part of me understands why. Too much of this is out of his control… including me.

I don’t have time to think about this now.

“Take me round to the delivery entrance, please Taylor.”

“Yes ma’am.”

There’s no one round the back. I am sure the pack of hounds will be here within seconds, but Jones and I make it in through the double-doored entrance at the rear with no bother. I head straight to my office while Jones heads to Reception to do whatever she does when she’s here.

Hanna hands me my latte, saying nothing.

“Thanks, Hanna.”

“Anything else you need, Bella?”

“Could I get a copy of the Seattle Times? I’d like to see what it says.”

“Sure thing.”

I sit down at my desk and call Rose. She’ll be anxious if she heard the news this morning.

~o~

It’s one o’clock. I’ve immersed myself in work all morning. There’s a knock on the door and Victoria pops her head round.

“Can I have a moment?” she asks brightly.

“Sure,” I mutter, surprises at her unscheduled appearance.

She enters and sits down, tossing her long red hair over her shoulder.

“I just wanted to check you’re okay. Roach asked me to pay you a visit,” she adds hurriedly. Flushing slightly, she continues, “I mean, with all that went on last night.”

James Smith’s arrest is all over the newspapers, but no-one seems to have made the connection yet with the fire at CEH.

“I’m fine,” I answer, trying not to think too deeply about how I feel. James wanted to do me harm. Well, that’s not news – he’s tried before. It’s Edward I’m more concerned about. I glance quickly at my email. There’s still nothing from him. I don’t know if I send him an email if I’d just be poking Mr Enraged further.

“Good,” Victoria answers, and her smile actually touches her eyes for a change. “If there’s anything I can do – anything you need – let me know.”

“Will do.”

Victoria stands.

“I know how busy you are, Bella. I’ll let you get on.”

“Um… thanks.”

She leaves.

That has to have been the briefest meeting in the Western Hemisphere today. Perhaps Roach sent her in here. Perhaps he's worried, given I'm his boss's wife. I shake off the dark thoughts and reach for my BlackBerry, in the hope that there might be a message from Edward. I hear my work email ping.

-

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Statement
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.04
To: Isabella Cullen

Isabella

Detective Clark will be visiting your office today at 3 pm to take your statement.
I have insisted that he should come to you, as I don't want you going to the police station.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I gaze at his email for a full five minutes, trying to think of a light and witty response to lift his mood. I draw a complete blank, and opt for brevity instead.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Statement
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.12
To: Edward Cullen

Okay.
Bx

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

I stare at the screen for another five minutes, anxious for his response… but there's nothing. Edward is not in the mood to play today.

I sit back. Can I blame him? My poor Fifty was probably frantic, back in the early hours of this morning. Then a thought occurs to me. He was in his tux when I woke this

morning. What time did he decide to come back from New York? He normally leaves functions between ten and eleven. Last night at that hour I was still at large with Rose.

Did Edward come home because I was out, or because of the James incident? If he left because I was out having a good time, he would have had no idea about James, about the police – nothing… until he landed in Seattle. It's suddenly very important to me to find out. If Edward came back merely because I was out then he was over-reacting. My subconscious sucks her teeth, wearing her harpy face. Okay, I am glad he's back, so maybe it's irrelevant. But still – Edward must have had one hell of a shock when he landed. No wonder he's so confused today. His earlier words come back to me: I am still fucking mad at you, Isabella. You're making me question my judgment.

I have to know – did he come back because of Cocktailgate, or because of the fucking lunatic?

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Your Flight
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.24
To: Edward Cullen

What time did you decide to come back to Seattle yesterday?

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your flight
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.26
To: Isabella Cullen

Why?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Your Flight
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.29
To: Edward Cullen

Call it curiosity.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Your flight
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.32
To: Isabella Cullen

Curiosity killed the cat.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Huh?
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.35
To: Edward Cullen

What is that oblique reference to?
You know where I am going with this don't you?
Did you decide to return because I went out for a drink with my friend after you asked me not to or did you return because a madman was in your apartment?

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

I stare at my screen. There's no response. I glance at the clock on my computer – 13.45 and still no response.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Here's the thing…
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.47
To: Edward Cullen

I will take your silence as an admission that you did indeed return to Seattle because I CHANGED MY MIND. I am an adult female and went for a drink with my friend. I did not understand the security ramifications of CHANGING MY MIND because YOU NEVER TELL ME ANYTHING. I found out from Rose that security has in fact been stepped up for all the Cullens, not just us. I think you generally over-react where my safety is concerned, and I understand why – but it's like the boy crying wolf. I never have a clue about what is a real concern or merely something that is perceived as a concern by you. I had two of the security detail with me. I thought both Rose and I would be safe. Fact is, we were safer in that bar than at the apartment. Had I been FULLY INFORMED of the situation I would have taken a different course of action. I understand your concerns are something to do with the material that was on James's computer here – or so Rose believes. Do you know how annoying it is to find out my best friend knows more about

what's going on with you than I do? And I am your WIFE. So are you going to tell me? Or will you continue to treat me like a child, guaranteeing that I continue to behave like one?

You are not the only one who is fucking pissed. Okay?

Bella

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

I hit send. There – stick that in your pipe and smoke it, Cullen.

I take a deep breath. I have worked myself up into quite a rage. Here was I feeling all sorry and guilty and badly behaved – well, he's just as much to blame for that.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Here's the thing…
Date: 28 August 2009: 13.58
To: Isabella Cullen

As ever Mrs Cullen you are forthright and challenging in email.
Perhaps we can discuss this when you get home.
I am still fucking pissed too.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I scowl at my computer, realising this is getting me nowhere. I don't respond, but pick up a manuscript recently received from a promising new author and begin to read.

~0~

My meeting with Detective Clark is uneventful. He is less growly than the night before, maybe because he's managed some sleep. Or maybe he just prefers working during the day.

"Thank you for your statement, Mrs Cullen."

"Your welcome, Detective. Is Smith in police custody yet?"

"Yes ma'am. He was released from hospital earlier this morning. With what he's charged with, he should be with us for a while." He smiles, his blue eyes crinkling in the corner.

"Good. This has been an anxious time for me and my husband."

"I spoke at length with Mr Cullen this morning. He's very relieved. Interesting man your husband."

You have no idea.

"Yes, I think so." I offer him a polite smile and he knows he's being dismissed.

"If you think of anything you can call me. Here's my card."

He wrestles a card out of his wallet and hands it to me.

"Thank you detective. I'll do that."

"Good day to you Mrs Cullen."

"Good day."

As he leaves I wonder exactly what Smith has been charged with… no doubt Edward won't tell me. I purse my lips.

~o~

We ride in silence to Escala. Stuart is driving this time, Jones at his side, and my heart grows heavier and heavier as we head back. I know Edward and I are going to have an almighty fight… and I don't know if I have the energy.

As I ride in the elevator from the garage with Jones beside me, I try to marshal my thoughts. What do I want to say? I think I said it all in my email… perhaps he'll give me some answers. I hope so. I can't help my nerves… my heart is pounding, my mouth dry and my palms are sweaty. I don't want to fight. But sometimes he's so difficult and I need to stand my ground.

The elevator doors slide open revealing the foyer and it's once more neat and tidy. The table is upright and a new vase is in place, with a gorgeous array of pale pink and white peonies. I quickly check the paintings as we wander through – the Madonnas all look to be intact. The broken foyer door is fixed and operational once more and Jones kindly opens it for me. She's been so quiet today… I think I prefer her this way.

I drop my briefcase in the hall and head into the great room. I stop. Holy Fuck.

"Hello, Mrs Cullen," Edward says softly. He's standing by the piano and he's dressed in a tight black t-shirt and he's wearing jeans…those jeans – the ones he wore in the playroom. Oh my. They are over-washed pale blue denim, snug, ripped at the knee and

hot… He's saunters over to me, his feet bare, the top button of the jeans undone, his smoldering green eyes never leaving mine.

"I've been waiting for you," he says.

Chapter 102/15

“Have you now?” I whisper. My mouth goes drier still, my heart pounding in my chest. Why’s he dressed like this? What does it mean? Is he still sulking?

“I have, Mrs Cullen,” he says softly, smirking as he strolls closer to me.

Holy crap he looks hot – his jeans hanging, that way, from his hips… Oh no. I’m not going to be distracted by Mr Sex-on-legs. I try to gauge his mood as he stalks me. Angry? Playful? Lustful? Gah! It’s impossible to tell.

“I like your jeans,” I murmur.

He grins, a disarming wolfish grin that doesn’t reach his eyes. Shit – he’s still mad. He stands in front of me, gazing down, wide unreadable eyes burning into mine. I swallow.

“I understand you have issues, Mrs Cullen,” he says, and he pulls something from the back pocket of his jeans. I can’t tear my gaze from his, but hear him unfold a piece of paper. He holds it up, and glancing briefly at it I immediately recognize my email. My gaze returns to his, as his eyes blaze green and bright with anger.

“Yes, I do have issues,” I mutter. I need distance if we’re going to discuss this. But before I can step back, he leans down and runs his nose along mine. My eyes flutter to a close as I welcome his unexpected, gentle touch.

“So do I,” he whispers against my skin and my eyes flicker open again at his words. He straightens and gazes intently at me once more.

“I think I’m familiar with your issues, Edward.” My voice is wry and he narrows his eyes, suppressing the amusement that sparks there momentarily. Are we going to fight? I take a precautionary step back. I must physically distance myself from him – from his smell, his look, his distracting body in those hot jeans. His brow furrows as I move away.

“Why did you fly back?” I whisper. Let’s get this over and done with.

“You know why.” He cocks his head to one side as if in warning.

“Because I went out with Rose?”

“Because you went back on your word and you defied me – putting yourself at unnecessary risk,” he hisses.

Holy Crap!

"Went back on my word? Is that how you see it?" I gasp, ignoring the rest of his sentence.

"Yes."

Talk about over-reaction! I start to roll my eyes but stop when he scowls at me.

"Edward. I changed my mind," I explain, slowly, patiently – as if he's a child. "I'm a woman. We're renowned for it. That's what we do."

He blinks at me as if he doesn't comprehend this.

"If I had thought for one minute that you would cancel your business trip – " Words fail me. I realize I don't know what to say – I am momentarily catapulted back to the argument over our vows. I never promised to obey you, Edward. But I hold my tongue, because deep down I'm glad he came back. In spite of his fury, I'm glad he's here in one piece, angry and smoldering in front of me.

"You changed your mind?" he whispers contemptuously.

"Yes."

"And you didn't think to call me?" He gazes at me, incredulous, before continuing, "What's more, you left the security detail short here and put Ryan at risk."

Oh. I hadn't thought about that.

"I should have called. I'm sorry. Having said that, I'm sure you would have told me off and not let me go – and I really wanted to go out, just for a change. I've missed Rose. Besides – it kept me out of the way when James was here. Ryan shouldn't have let him in," I add, petulantly. This is so confusing. Jeez – if Ryan hadn't, James would still be at large.

Edward's eyes gleam wildly, then shut, his face tightening as if in pain. Oh no. What's he going to do? He shakes his head, and before I know it he has folded me in his arms, pulling me hard against him.

"Thank Christ you weren't here," he murmurs into my hair.

What?

"You just told me off for not being here," I stutter, beyond confused.

"I know."

“Edward, make up your damned mind,” I breathe, putting my arms around him. Oh he feels good.

“I can’t – that’s the problem. You’ve made me question my judgment, over and over again.”

“Why can’t you just trust me?”

“Trust you?”

I can feel his incomprehension.

“Of course I trust you, baby.” He pulls back, gaping at me as if I’m crazy.

My heart soars at the endearment.

“It’s others I don’t trust. It’s just – ” He stops and his arms wrap around me once more, like he’s clinging to me for dear life. I can barely breathe, he’s holding me so tightly.

“If something were to happen to you – ” His voice is barely a whisper.

“It didn’t,” I manage to speak.

“But it could have. I’ve died a thousand deaths today, thinking about what might have happened to you. I was so mad, Bella. Mad at you. Mad at myself. Mad at everyone. I can’t remember ever being this angry… except – ” He stops again.

Oh?

“Except?” I prompt.

“Once. In your old apartment. When Lauren was there.”

Oh. Then. I don’t want to think about that.

“You were so cold this morning,” I murmur. My voice cracks on the last word as I remember the hideous feeling of rejection in the shower.

“Cold?”

His hands move to the nape of my neck, loosening their grip on me, and I take a deep breath. He pulls my head back.

“I never want to hurt you,” he says, his eyes wide and wary. “This morning –” He stops, lost for words I think, or too afraid to say them.

“You were worried you’d hurt me?” I finish his sentence for him, not believing that he’d hurt me for a minute, but relieved too. A small vicious part of me feared it was because he didn’t want me any more.

“Yes. I didn’t trust myself,” he says quietly, and I can hear the shame in his voice.

“Edward, I know you’d never hurt me. Not physically, anyway.” I clasp his head between my hands.

“Do you?” he asks, and I can hear the skepticism in his voice.

“Yes. I knew what you said was an empty, idle threat. I know you’re not going to beat the shit out of me.”

“I wanted to.”

“No you didn’t. You just thought you did.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” he murmurs.

“Think about it,” I urge, wrapping my arms around him once more and nuzzling his chest through the black t-shirt. “About how you felt when I left. You’ve told me often enough what that did to you. How it changed you. I know what you’ve given up for me.”

He stills, and I know he’s processing this information. I hold him tightly, my hands on this back, feeling his taut toned muscles beneath his t-shirt. Gradually he relaxes in my arms, and I can physically feel the tension slowly leave him. Is this what’s been worrying him? That he’ll hurt me? Why do I have more faith in him than he has in himself? I don’t understand. He’s normally so strong, so in control, but without that, he’s lost. Oh Fifty, Fifty, Fifty – I’m sorry. He kisses my hair, and I turn my face up to his, and his lips find mine, searching, taking, giving, begging – for what, I don’t know. I just want to feel his mouth on mine, and I return his kiss passionately. I groan.

“You have such faith in me,” he whispers, when he breaks away.

“I do,” I murmur softly.

He strokes my face with the back of his knuckles and the tip of his thumb, gazing intently into my eyes, and his anger has gone. My Fifty is back from wherever he’s been. It’s good to see him. I glance shyly up and smirk.

“Besides,” I whisper, “You don’t have my permission.”

His mouth drops open in amused shock, and he pulls me to his chest again, clasping me tightly once more.

“You’re right. I don’t,” he laughs. We stand in the middle of the great room, locked in our embrace, just holding each other.

“Come to bed,” he whispers, after heaven knows how long.

Oh my…

“Edward, we need to talk.”

“Later,” he urges softly.

“Edward, please. Talk to me.”

He sighs.

“About what?”

“You know. You keep me in the dark.”

“I want to protect you.”

“I’m not a child.”

“I am fully aware you’re not a child, Mrs Cullen.” He runs his hands down my body, and cups my backside. “Especially right now.” He flexes his hips towards me, and I can feel his erection.

“Edward!” I scold. “Talk to me.”

He sighs once more, with exasperation.

“What do you want to know?” His voice is resigned, and he releases me. I baulk – I didn’t mean you had to let me go. Taking my hand he reaches down to pick up my email, which has ended up on the floor.

“Lots of things,” I mutter, as I let him lead me to the grey couch.

“Sit,” he orders.

Some things never change, I muse, doing as I'm told. Edward sits beside me, and leaning forward, puts his head in his hands.

Oh no. Is this too hard for him? Then he sits up and rakes both hands through his hair, and turns to me, at once expectant and reconciled to his fate.

"Ask me," he says simply.

Oh. Well, that was easier than I thought.

"Why the additional security for your family?"

"Smith was a threat to them."

"How do you know?"

"From his computer. It held personal details, about me and the rest of my family. Especially Carlisle."

"Carlisle? Why him?"

"I don't know yet. Let's go to bed."

"Edward, tell me!"

"Tell you what?"

"You are so – exasperating."

"So are you." He glares at me.

"You didn't ramp up the security when you first found out there was information about your family on the computer. So what happened? Why now?"
Edward narrows his eyes at me.

"I didn't know he was going to attempt to burn down my building, or – " He stops. "We thought it was an unwelcome obsession, but you know," he shrugs, "When you're in the public eye, people are interested. It was random stuff: news reports on me from when I was at Harvard, my rowing, reports on Carlisle – following his career, Emmett too – and to some extent, Alice and Mom."

How strange.

"You said 'Or'," I prompt.

“Or what?”

“You said, ‘attempt to burn down my building, or…’ like you were going to say something else.”

“Are you hungry?”

What? I frown at him, but my stomach rumbles, betraying my hunger.

“Um, yes.” I blink.

“Good. So am I. Let me feed you.”

And the way he says it makes everything south of my navel liquefy.

“Feed me?” I whisper.

“Come,” he says. He stands and holds out his hand.

This is such a typically mercurial diversion from what we’ve been discussing. Is that it? Is that all I’m getting out of him for now? Leading me over to the kitchen Edward grabs a bar stool and hefts it around to the other side of the island.

“Sit,” he says.

“Where’s Mrs Cope?” I ask, distracted, as I perch on the stool.

“I’ve given her the night off.”

Oh.

“Why?”

He gazes at me for a beat.

“Because I can.”

“So you’re going to cook?” I can’t contain my incredulous smirk.

“Oh ye of little faith, Mrs Cullen. Close your eyes.”

I blink at him, marveling. I thought we were going to have a full on fight – and here we are, playing in the kitchen.

“Close them,” he says.

I roll them first, then oblige.

“Hmmm. Not good enough,” he mutters.

I open one eye and see him take a plum colored silk scarf out of the back pocket of his jeans. It matches my dress. Holy cow. I look quizzically at him.

“Close,” he orders again. “No peeking.”

“You’re going to blindfold me?” I mutter, shocked. All of a sudden I’m breathless.

“Yes.”

“Edward – ” He places a finger upon my lips, silencing me.

I want to talk.

“We’ll talk later. I want you to eat now. You said you were hungry.” Leaning over he lightly kisses my lips. He smells so good. I feel the soft silk of the scarf against my eyelids as he ties it tightly at the back of my head.

“Can you see?” he asks.

“No,” I mutter, figuratively rolling my eyes.

He chuckles softly.

“I can tell when you’re rolling your eyes, you know.”

I purse my lips.

“Can we just get this over and done with?” I snap.

He gasps in mock horror.

“Such impatience, Mrs Cullen. So eager to talk.”

“Yes!”

“I must feed you first,” he says, determined.

I hear the fridge door open and various dishes being placed on the counter top behind me. Edward pads over to the microwave, pops something in and switches it on. My curiosity is piqued. I hear the toaster lever drop, the turn of the control and the quiet tick of the timer. Hmmm – toast?

"Yes. I am eager to talk," I murmur, distracted. I can smell an assortment of exotic, spicy aromas. Holy crow – what is he doing? I shift in my chair.

"Be still, Isabella," he murmurs, and he's close to me again.

Hmmm. My inner goddess freezes, not even blinking.

"And don't bite your lip." Gently he pulls my bottom lip free of my teeth, and I can't help my smile.

Next I hear the soft pop of a cork being drawn from a bottle and the gentle glug of wine being poured into a glass. I feel him lean across behind me, then hear a soft click, and the quiet white noise of the surround sound speakers hissing to life. A loud twang of a guitar begins a song I don't know. Edward turns the volume down so it's in the background. A man with a deep, low voice sings:

The world was on fire and no one could save me but you.
Strange what desire will make foolish lovers do

"A drink first, I think," Edward whispers. "Head back."

I tip my head back.

"Further." I oblige, and his lips are on mine, and cool crisp wine flows into my mouth. I swallow reflexively. Oh my… and memories flood back, of not so long ago – me trussed up on my bed in Vancouver, before I graduated, with a hot, angry Edward not appreciating my email. Hmmm… have times changed? Not much. Except now I recognize the wine. Edward's favorite – a Sancerre.

"Hmmm," I murmur.

"You like the wine?" he whispers. I can feel his breath on my cheek, feel his proximity – the vitality, the heat radiating from his body. He doesn't touch me.

"Yes," I breathe.

"More?"

"I always want more, with you."

I can almost hear his grin. It makes me grin too.

"Mrs Cullen, are you flirting with me?"

"Yes."

I hear his wedding ring clink against the glass as he takes another sip of wine. This time he pulls my head right back. Cradling the back of my head, he kisses me once more, and greedily I swallow the wine he gives me. I can feel his smile as he kisses me again.

"Hungry?"

"I think we've already established that, Mr Cullen."

What a wicked game to play, to make me feel this way
What a wicked thing to do, to let me dream of you

The microwave pings, and Edward releases me. I sit up. I can smell something spicy: garlic, mint, oregano, rosemary, and… lamb, I think. What is he cooking? I hear the door to the microwave open, and the appetizing smell grows stronger.

"Shit! Christ!" Edward curses, and a dish clatters onto the countertop.

Oh no.

"You okay?"

"Yes!" he snaps, his voice tight. A moment later he's standing beside me once more.

"I just burnt myself. Here." He eases his index finger into my mouth. "Maybe you could suck it better."

"Oh." Clasping his hand I draw his finger slowly from my mouth. "There, there," I soothe, and leaning forward I blow – cooling his finger, I hope – then kiss it gently, twice. He stops breathing. I re-insert it into my mouth, and suck, gently. I hear his sharp intake of breath, and the sound travels straight to my groin. Oh my… what happened to talking? He tastes delicious as ever, and I realize that this is his game – the slow seduction of his wife. I thought he was mad, and now… My subconscious gapes at me, then shrugs and returns to her game of Scrabble. This man, my husband, is so confusing. But right now this is how I like him. Playful. Fun. Sexy as hell. He's given me some answers, but I'm greedy. I want more – but I want to play too. After the anxiety and tension of today, and the nightmare of last night with James, this is a welcome relief.

“What are you thinking?” Edward murmurs, stopping my thoughts in their tracks as he pulls his finger out of my mouth.

“How mercurial you are.”

He stills beside me.

“Fifty Shades baby,” he says eventually, and he plants a soft kiss at the corner of my mouth.

“My Fifty Shades,” I whisper. Grabbing his t-shirt I pull him back to me.

“Oh no you don’t, Mrs Cullen. No molesting the staff.” He takes my hand, prises it off his t-shirt, and kisses each finger in turn.

“Sit up,” he commands softly.

I pout.

“I will spank you if you pout. Now open wide.”

Oh shit. I open my mouth and he pops in a forkful of… spicy lamb, covered in a cool, minty, yogurty sauce. Hmmm. I chew.

“You like?”

“Yes.”

He makes an appreciative noise, and I know he’s eating and enjoying too.

“More?”

I nod. He gives me another forkful and I chew it gratefully. I hear him putting the fork down and he tears… bread, I think.

“Open,” he orders.

This time it’s pita bread and hummus. I realize Mrs Cope – or maybe even Edward –has been shopping at the delicatessen I discovered about five weeks ago, only two blocks from Escala. I chew gratefully. Edward in a playful mood increases my appetite. It occurs to me I haven’t eaten much all day.

“More?” he asks.

I nod.

“More of everything. Please. I’m starving.”

Slowly and patiently he feeds me, occasionally kissing a morsel of food from the corner of my mouth or wiping it off with his fingers. Intermittently he offers me a sip of wine in his unique way.

“Open wide, then bite,” he murmurs.

I follow his command. Hmmm – one of my favorites, stuffed vine leaves. Even cold they are delicious, though I prefer them heated up… but I don’t want to risk Edward burning himself again. He feeds it to me slowly, and when I’ve finished I lick his fingers clean.

“More?” he asks, his voice low and husky.

I shake my head. I’m full.

“Good. You’re dessert.”

What? He scoops me up in his arms, surprising me so much I squeal.

“Can I take the blindfold off?”
“No.”

I almost pout, then remember his threat and think better of it.

“Playroom,” he whispers.

Oh – I don’t know if that’s a good idea.

“You up for the challenge?” he asks. And because he’s used the word challenge I can’t say no.

“Bring it on,” I murmur, desire and something that I don’t want to name thrumming through my body. He carries me through the door, then up the stairs to the second floor.

“I think you’ve lost weight,” he mutters disapprovingly.

I have? Good. I remember his comment when we arrived back from our honeymoon, and how much it smarted. Jeez – was that just a week ago?

Outside the playroom he slides me down his body and sets me on my feet, but keeps his arm wrapped around my waist. Briskly he unlocks the door.

It always smells the same: polished wood and citrus. It's actually become a comforting smell. Releasing me Edward turns me round so I'm facing away from him. He undoes the scarf, and I blink in the soft light. Gently he pulls the hairpins from my updo, and my braid falls free. He grasps it and tugs gently, so I have to step back against him.

"I have a plan," he whispers in my ear, sending delicious shivers down my spine.

"I thought you might," I answer. He kisses me beneath my ear.

"Oh Mrs Cullen, I do." His voice is soft, mesmerizing. He tugs my braid to the side and plants a trail of soft kisses down my throat.

"First we have to get you naked." His voice hums low in his throat and resonates through my body. I want this – whatever this turns out to be. I want to connect the way we know how. He turns me around to face him. I glance down at his jeans, the top button still undone, and I can't help myself. Reaching out I brush my index finger around the waistband, feeling the hairs in his happy trail tickle my knuckle. He inhales sharply, and my eyes whip up to meet his. I stop at the unfastened button. His green eyes darken to a deeper jade… oh my.

"You should keep these on," I whisper.

"I fully intend to, Isabella."

And he moves, grabbing me, one hand to the back of my neck, the other around my backside. He pulls me against him, then his mouth is on mine and he's kissing me like his life depends on it.

Whoa!

He walks me backwards, our tongues entwined, one hand on my head the other firmly on my behind, until I feel the wooden cross behind me. He leans into me, so that I feel the contours of his body pressing into mine.

"Let's get rid of this dress," he says. Reaching down with both hands he slowly peels my dress up and off my body, over my thighs, my hips, my belly… slowly, the material skimming over my skin, skimming over my breasts.

"Lean forward," he says.

I comply, and he pulls my dress over my head and discards it on the floor, leaving me standing in my sandals, panties and bra. His eyes blaze as he grasps both my hands and raises them over my head. He blinks once and tilts his head to one side, and I know he's

asking for my permission. What the fuck is he going to do to me? I swallow, then nod, and a trace of an admiring – almost proud – smile touches his lips. He clips my wrists into the leather cuffs on the bar above and produces the scarf once more.

"Think you've seen enough," he murmurs. He wraps it around my head, blindfolding me again, and I feel a frisson run through me as all my other senses heighten: the sound of his soft breathing, my own excited response, the blood pulsating in my ears, Edward's scent mixed with the citrus and polish in the room – all are bought into sharper focus because I can't see. His nose touches mine.

"I'm going to drive you wild," he whispers. His hands grasp my hips, and he moves down, removing my panties as his hands glide down my legs. Jeez… is this a good idea?

"Lift your feet, one at a time," he says. I oblige and he removes first my panties, then each sandal in turn. Gently grasping my ankle he tugs my leg gently to the right.

"Step," he says. He cuffs my right ankle to the cross, then proceeds to do the same with my left. I am helpless and practically spread-eagled on the cross. Standing Edward steps towards me, and I can feel his warmth, though he doesn't touch me. He grasps my chin, tilts my head up and kisses me chastely.

"Some music and toys I think. You look beautiful like this, Mrs Cullen. I may take a moment to admire the view." His voice is soft. Everything clenches, deep in my belly. Oh my. What is he going to do?

After a moment I hear him pad quietly to the museum chest and open one of the drawers. The butt drawer? I have no idea. He takes something out and places it on the top, followed by… something else. What? The speakers spring to life, and after a moment the strains of single piano playing a soft lilting melody fill the room. It's familiar – Bach I think – but I don't know what piece it is. Something about the music makes me apprehensive. I frown, trying to grasp why – but Edward is in front of me once more. He grasps my chin, startling me, and tugs gently so that I release my bottom lip. I smile slightly – I can't believe I'm still unaware of when I bite my lip – but also to reassure myself. Why do I feel uneasy? Is it the music?

Edward runs his hand from my chin along my throat and down my chest to my breast. Using his thumb he pulls at the cup, freeing my breast from the restraint of my bra. He makes a low, soft, appreciative humming noise in his throat, and leaning down kisses my neck. His lips follow the path of his fingers to my breast, kissing and sucking all the way. His fingers move to my left breast, and that too is released from my bra. I moan as he skates his thumb across my left nipple and his lips close round my right, tugging and teasing gently until both nipples are long and hard.

"Ah."

He doesn't stop. Slowly, with exquisite care, he increases the intensity on each, and I pull against my restraints fruitlessly, and sharp pleasure spikes from my nipples to my groin. I try to squirm but I can hardly move, and it makes the torture all the more delicious.

"Edward," I breathe, and it's some sort of plea.

"I know," he breathes. "This is what you make me feel."

What? I groan, and he begins again, subjecting my nipples to his sweet agonizing touch, over and over… taking me closer.

"Please," I mewl.

He hums low in his throat – a primal sound – then stands, leaving me bereft, breathless and squirming against my restraints. He runs his hands down my sides, one pausing on my hip, while the other travels down my belly.

"Let's see how you're doing," he croons softly. Gently he cups my sex, brushing his thumb across my clitoris and making me cry out. Slowly he inserts one, then two fingers inside me. I groan and thrust my hips forward, eager to meet his fingers and the palm of his hand.

"Oh Isabella, you're so ready," he breathes.

He circles his fingers inside me, round and round, while his thumb strokes my clitoris, back and forth, once more. It's the only point on my body where he's touching me, and all the tension, all the anxiety of the day, is concentrated on this one part of my anatomy. Holy crow… it's intense… and strange… the music… I can feel myself building… oh boy… Edward shifts, his hand still moving against and in me, and I hear a low buzzing noise.

"What?" I gasp.

"Hush," he soothes, and his lips are on mine, effectively silencing me. I welcome the warmer, more intimate contact, kissing him voraciously. He breaks the contact and the buzzing noise gets nearer.

"This is a wand, baby," he murmurs. "It vibrates."

He holds it against my chest, and it feels like a large ball-like object vibrating against me. I shiver as it moves across my skin, down between my breasts, across to first one, then the other nipple… and I'm awash with sensation, tingling everywhere, synapses firing as dark, dark need pools at the base of my belly.

"Ah," I groan, while Edward's fingers continue to move inside me. I'm close… all this stimulation… Tilting my head back I moan loudly, and Edward stills his fingers. All sensation stops.

"No!" I mutter wordlessly. "Edward," I plead, trying to thrust my hips forward for some friction.

"Still, baby," he says.

And my impending orgasm melts away. Oh no… He leans forward once more, and kisses me.

"Frustrating, isn't it?" he murmurs.

Oh no! Suddenly I understand his game.

"Edward, please."

"Hush," he says, and kisses me.

And he starts to move again… wand, fingers, thumb… a lethal combination of sensual torture. He shifts so his body brushes against mine. He's still dressed – I feel soft denim against my leg, his erection at my hip… so tantalizingly close. He brings me to the brink again, my body singing with need, and stops.

"No," I mewl loudly.

He plants soft wet kisses on my shoulder as he withdraws his fingers from me, and moves the wand down. It oscillates over my stomach, my belly, onto my sex, against my clitoris. Fuck it's intense.

"Ah!" I cry out, pulling hard on the restraints.

My body is so sensitized I feel I am going to explode – and just as I am, Edward stops again.

"Edward, no!" I cry out.

"Frustrating, yes?" he murmurs against my throat. "Just like you. Promising one thing, and then…" His voice trails off.

"Edward, please!" I beg.

He pushes the wand against me again.

“Each time I stop, it feels more intense when I start again. Right?”

“Please,” I whimper. My nerve endings are screaming for release.

The buzzing stops and Edward kisses me. He runs his nose down mine.

“You are the most frustrating woman I have ever met.”

No, No, No.

“Edward, I never promised to obey you. Please, please – ”

He moves in front of me, grabs my behind and pushes his hips against me, making me gasp – his groin rubbing into mine, the buttons of his jeans pressing into me, barely containing his erection. With one hand he pulls off the blindfold and grasps my chin, and I blink up into his scorching emerald eyes.

“You drive me crazy,” he whispers, flexing his hips against me once, twice, three times more, causing my body to light up – ready to burn. And again he denies me… I want him so badly. I need him so badly. I close my eyes and mutter some prayer. I can’t help but feel I’m being punished. I’m helpless and he’s ruthless. Tears spring to my eyes. I don’t know how far he’s going to take this.

“Please,” I whisper once more.

But he gazes down at me, implacable. He’s just going to continue. For how long?
No. No. No – I can’t do this. And the dam bursts – all the apprehension, the anxiety, and the fear from the last couple of days overwhelming me anew, as tears course down my face and I turn away from him.

“Red,” I whimper. “Red. Red.”

He stills.

“No,” he gasps, stunned. “Jesus Christ, no.”

He moves quickly, unclipping my hands, clasping me around my waist and leaning down to unclip my ankles, while I put my head in my hands and weep.

“No, no, no. Bella, please. No.”

Picking me up he moves to the bed, sitting down and cradling me in his lap while I sob inconsolably. He reaches behind him, drags the satin sheet off the four-poster bed and

drapes it round me. The cool sheets feel alien and unwelcome against my sensitized skin. He wraps his arms around me and clasps me to him, rocking gently backwards and forwards.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Edward murmurs, his voice raw and full of sorrow. He kisses my hair over and over again. "Bella, forgive me, please."

Turning my face into his neck I continue to cry, and it's a cathartic release. So much has happened over the last few days – fires in computer rooms, car chases, careers planned out for me, trollopey architects, armed lunatics in the apartment, arguments – and Edward has been away. I hate Edward going away… and he smells so good, so comforting. I use the corner of the sheet to wipe my nose, and gradually become aware that the cool, almost clinical tones of Bach are still echoing softly round the room.

"Please switch the music off," I sniff.

"Yes, of course." Edward shifts, not letting me go, and pulls the remote out of his back pocket. He presses a button and the piano music ceases. "Better?" he asks.

I nod, my crying easing. Edward wipes my tears away gently with his thumb.

"Not a Bach fan?" he asks.

"Not that piece. If you were playing it would be different."

He gazes down at me, his eyes wide and wary, trying and failing to hide his shame.

"I'm sorry," he says again.

"Why did you do that?" My voice is barely audible.

He shakes his head sadly and closes his eyes as if in pain.

"I'm just angry, Bella. You never –" He stops. I shift in his lap, and he winces.

Oh.

I flush.

"Sorry," I mutter.

He rolls his eyes, then leans back suddenly, taking me with him, so that we're both lying on the bed, me in his arms. My bra is uncomfortable, and I adjust it.

“Need a hand?” he asks quietly.

I shake my head. He shifts so he’s looking down at me, and tentatively raising his hand he strokes his fingers softly down my face. Tears pool in my eyes again.

“Please don’t cry,” he whispers.

I blink, trying to hold back my tears, as I gaze into the harrowed eyes of the man I love. I take a shuddering breath, my eyes not leaving his. What am I going to do with this controlling man? Learn to be controlled?

“I never what?” I ask.

“Do as you’re told. You changed your mind you didn’t tell me where you were. Bella, I was in New York, powerless and livid. If I’d been in Seattle I’d have come and fetched you home.”

“So you’re punishing me?”

He swallows, his eyes widening. He doesn’t have to answer, and I know that punishing me was his exact intention.

“You have to stop doing this,” I murmur.

His brow furrows as he processes my words.

“For a start, you only end up feeling more shitty about yourself,” I continue.

He snorts softly.

“That’s true,” he mutters. “I don’t like to see you like this.”

“And I don’t like being like this.” I reach up and stroke his cheek. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you. I won’t be so selfish again. I know you worry about me.”

He nods.

“Okay. Good,” he says. He leans down, but pauses before his lips touch mine, silently asking if it’s allowed. I raise my face to his, and he kisses me tenderly.

“Your lips are always so soft when you’ve been crying,” he murmurs.

“I never promised to obey you, Edward,” I whisper.

"I know."

"Deal with it, please. For both of us. And I will try and be more considerate of your… controlling tendencies."

He blinks, looking lost and vulnerable, completely at sea.

"I'll try," he murmurs.

I sigh, a long shuddering sigh.

"Besides, if I had been here…"

"I know," he says, and blanches. Lying back he puts the arm that is not wrapped around me over his face. I curl around him and lay my head on his chest. We both lie silent for a few moments. His hands move to the end of my braid. He pulls the tie from it, freeing my hair, and gently, rhythmically, combs his fingers through it.

"What did you mean earlier, when you said, 'or'?"

"Or?"

"Something about James."

He peers down at me.

"You don't give up, do you?"

I rest my chin on his sternum, enjoying the soothing caress of his fingers in my hair.

"Tell me. I don't like being kept in the dark. You seem to have some overblown idea that I need protecting. You don't even know how to shoot – I do.

"Do you think I can't handle whatever it is you won't tell me? Edward, I've had your stalker ex-sub pull a gun on me, your pedophile ex-lover harass me – and don't look at me like that," I snap when he scowls at me. "Your mother feels the same way about her."

"You talked to my mother about Irina?" Edward gasps.

"Yes, Esme and I talked about her."

He gapes at me.

"She's very upset about it. Blames herself."

“I can’t believe you spoke to my mother. Shit!” He lies down and puts his arm over his face again.

“I didn’t go into any specifics.”

“I should hope not. Esme doesn’t need all the gory details. Christ, Bella. My Dad too?”

“No!” I shake my head vehemently. I so don’t have that kind of relationship with Carlisle. His comments about the pre-nup still haunt me. “Anyway, you’re trying to distract me – again. James. What about him?”

Edward lifts his arm briefly and gazes at me, his expression unreadable. Sighing he puts his arm back over his face.

“Smith is implicated in Echo Charlie’s sabotage. The investigators found a partial print – just partial so they couldn’t make a match. But then you recognized Smith in the server room. He has convictions as a minor in Detroit, and the prints matched his.”

My mind reels as I try to absorb this information. James brought down Echo Charlie?

But Edward is on a roll.

“This morning a cargo van was found in the garage here. Smith was the driver. Yesterday he delivered some shit to that new guy who’s moved in – the guy we met in the elevator.”

“I don’t remember his name.”

“Me neither.” Edward says. “But that’s how Smith managed to get into the building legitimately. He was working for a delivery company.” He stops.

“And? What’s so important about the van?”

Edward says nothing.

“Edward, tell me.”

“The cops found… things in the van.” He stops again and tightens his hold around me.

“What things?”

He’s quiet for several moments and I open my mouth to prompt him again, but he speaks.

“A mattress, a bottle of chloroform and a note.” His voice has softened to barely a whisper, and I can feel the horror and revulsion rolling off him.

Holy Fuck.

“Note?” I breathe.

“Addressed to me.”

“What did it say?”

“I don’t know. Clark wouldn’t tell me.”

Oh.

“Smith came here last night with the intention of kidnapping you.” Edward freezes, his face taut with tension. As he says those words I recall the duct tape, and a shudder runs through me. But deep, deep down, this is not news to me.

“Shit,” I mutter.

“Quite,” Edward says tightly.

I try and remember James in the office. Was he always insane? How did he think he could get away with this? I mean he was pretty creepy – but this unhinged?

“I don’t understand why,” I murmur. “It doesn’t make sense to me.”

“I know. The police are digging further, and so is Jenks. But we think Detroit is the connection.”

“Detroit?” I gaze at him, confused.

“Yeah. There’s something there.”

“I still don’t understand.”

Edward lifts his face and gazes at me, his expression unreadable.

“Bella, I was born in Detroit.”

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I blink at him and frown as the information sinks in.

"I thought you were born here in Seattle," I murmur. My mind is racing. What does this have to do with James? Edward raises the arm that was covering his face, reaches behind him and grabs one of the pillows. Placing it under his head he settles back and gazes at me, his expression wary. After a moment he shakes his head.

"No. Emmett and I were both adopted in Detroit. We moved here shortly after my adoption. Esme wanted to be on the West Coast, away from the urban sprawl, and Dad got a job at Northwest Hospital. I have very little memory of that time. Alice was adopted here."

"So James is from Detroit?"

"Yes."

Oh…

"How do you know?"

"I ran a background check when you went to work for him."

Of course he did.

"Do you have a manila file on him too?" I smirk up at him.

Edward's mouth twists as he hides his amusement.

"I think it's pale blue, actually," he says. His fingers continue to run through my hair. It's soothing.

"What does it say in his file?"

Edward blinks. Reaching down he strokes my cheek.

"You really want to know?"

"Is it that bad?"

He shrugs.

"I've known worse," he whispers.

Oh no! Is he referring to himself? And the image I hold of Edward as a small, dirty, fearful lost boy comes to mind. I curl around him, holding him tighter, pulling the sheet over him, and I lay my cheek against his chest.

"What?" he asks, puzzled by my reaction.

" Nothing," I murmur.

"No, no. This works both ways, Mrs Cullen. What is it?"

I glance up at him and gaze momentarily at his apprehensive expression. I rest my cheek upon his chest once more.

"Sometimes I picture you as a child… before you came to live with the Cullens."

Edward stiffens.

"I wasn't talking about me. I don't want your pity, Isabella. That part of my life is done. Gone."

"It's not pity," I whisper, appalled. "It's sympathy, and sorrow – sorrow that anyone could do that to a child." I take a deep steadying breath, as my stomach twists and tears prick my eyes anew. I don't want to cry any more. Edward is resolutely silent and tense beneath me.

"And that part of your life is not done, Edward – how can you say that? You live every day with your past. You told me yourself – Fifty Shades, remember?"

Edward snorts and runs his free hand through his hair. His body relaxes slightly.

"I know it's why you feel the need to control me. Keep me safe," I add, contritely.

"And yet you choose to defy me," he says softly, baffled.

I frown. Holy crow! Do I do that deliberately? My subconscious removes her half-moon glasses and chews the end, nodding and smirking at me. I ignore her. This is so confusing – I'm his wife, not his submissive, not some company that he's acquired. I'm not the crack-whore who was his mother… *Fuck.* The thought is sickening. Dr Banners' words come back to me:

"Emotionally Edward is an adolescent, Bella. He bypassed that phase in his life totally. He's channeled all his energies into succeeding in the business world, and he has, beyond all expectations. His emotional world… has to play catch-up.

"Just keep doing what you're doing. Edward is head over heels… It's a delight to see."

That's it. I'm just doing what I've always done. Isn't that what Edward found attractive in the first place?

"You make me look at the world differently, Isabella. You don't want me for my money. You give me… hope.

."And you're right. I am used to women doing exactly what I say, when I say… doing exactly what I want. It gets old quickly. There's something about you, Isabella… that calls to me, on some deep level that I don't understand. It's a siren's call… I can't resist you and I don't want to lose you."

Oh, this man is so confusing.

"Dr Banner said I should give you the benefit of the doubt. I think I do – I'm not sure. Perhaps it's my way of bringing you to the here and now – away from your past." I shrug, apologetically. "I don't know. I just can't seem to get a handle on how far you'll over-react."

His hand stills in my hair, and he's silent for a moment.

"Fucking Banner," he mutters quietly to himself.

"He said I should continue to behave the way I've always behaved with you."

"Did he now?" Edward mutters dryly.

Okay. Here goes nothing.

"Edward, I know you loved your mom, and you couldn't save her. It wasn't your job to do that. But I'm not her."

He freezes again.

"Don't," he whispers.

"No, listen. Please." I raise my head to gaze at him and he stares back at me, green eyes paralyzed with fear. He's holding his breath. *Oh, Edward…* my heart twists. "I'm not

her. I am much stronger than she was. I have you, and you're so much stronger now, and I know you love me. I love you too," I whisper.

His brow creases as if my words were not what he expected.

"Do you still love me?" he asks.

"Of course I do. Edward, I will always love you. No matter what you do to me." Is this the reassurance he wants?

He exhales and closes his eyes, placing his arm over his face again, but hugging me closer too.

"Don't hide from me," I murmur. Reaching up I grasp his hand and pull his arm away from his face. "You've spent your life hiding. Please don't, not from me."

He blinks down at me and frowns.

"Hiding?" I hear the incredulity in his voice.

"Yes."

He shifts suddenly, rolling over onto his side and moving me so that I am lying beside him on the bed. He reaches up, smoothes my hair off my face and tucks it behind my ear.

"You asked me earlier today if I hated you. I didn't understand why, and now…" He stops, staring down at me as if I'm a complete conundrum.

"You think I hate you?" Now my voice is incredulous.

"No," he shakes his head. "Not now." He looks relieved. "But I need to know – why did you safe-word, Bella?"

I blanch. What can I tell him? That he frightened me. That I didn't know if he'd stop. That I begged him – and he didn't stop. That I didn't want things to escalate… like – like that one time in here. I shudder as I recall him whipping me with his belt.

I swallow.

"Because… because you were so angry, and distant, and – cold. I didn't know how far you'd go."

His expression is unreadable.

"Were you going to let me come?" My voice is barely a whisper, and I can feel a blush steal over my cheeks, but I hold his gaze.

"No," he says eventually.

I can't help my shocked gasp. *Holy crap.*

"That's… harsh."

He reaches across and his knuckle grazes softly down my cheek.

"But effective," he murmurs. He gazes down at me as if he's trying to see through to my soul, his eyes darkening. After an eternity he murmurs,

"I'm glad you did."

Oh!

"Really?" I don't understand.

His lips twist in a sad smile.

"Yes. I don't want to hurt you. I got carried away." He reaches down and kisses me. "Lost in the moment." He kisses me again. "Happens a lot with you."

Oh? And for some unknown reason the thought pleases me… greatly. I grin. Why does that make me happy? He grins too.

"I don't know why you're grinning, Mrs Cullen."

"Me neither."

He wraps himself around me and places his head on my chest. We are a tangle of naked and denimed limbs and satin red sheets. I stroke his back with one hand and run the fingers of my other hand through his hair. He sighs, and I can feel him relax in my arms.

"I never want to hurt you," he murmurs. "I need…" he stops.

"You need what?"

"I need control, Bella. Like I need you. It's the only way I can function. I can't let go of it. I can't. And yet, with you…" He shakes his head slightly.

I swallow. This is the heart of our dilemma – his need for control and his need for me. I refuse to believe these are mutually exclusive.

"I need you too," I whisper, hugging him tighter. "I'll try, Edward. I'll try to be more considerate."

"I want you to need me," he murmurs.

"I do." My voice is impassioned. I need him so much. I love him so much.

"I want to look after you."

"You do," I exclaim reassuringly. "I missed you so much while you were away."

"You did?" He sounds so surprised.

"Yes, of course. I hate you going away."

I feel rather than see his smile.

"You could have come with me."

"Edward, please. Let's not rehash that argument. I want to work."

He sighs and I work my fingers through his hair, stroking and stroking.

"I love you, Bella."

"I love you too, Edward. I will always love you."

We lie tangled together. I listen to the steady beat of his heart and drift exhausted into sleep.

~o~

I wake with a start, disorientated. Where am I? The playroom. The lights are still on, softly illuminating the blood-red walls.

Edward moans again, loudly, and I realize this is what woke me.

"No," he groans.

He's sprawled out beside me, his head back, his eyes screwed shut, his face contorted in anguish.

Holy shit. He's having a nightmare.

"No!" he cries out again.

"Edward, wake up," I call, and struggle to sit up, kicking off the sheet. Kneeling beside him I grab his shoulders and shake him, as tears spring to my eyes.

"Edward, please. Wake up!"

His eyes spring open, green and wild, his pupils enlarged with fear. He stares unseeingly up at me.

"Edward," I breathe. "You're having a nightmare. You're home. You're safe."

He blinks, looks around wildly, and frowns as he takes in our surroundings. Then his eyes are back on mine.

"Bella," he breathes, and with no preamble whatsoever he reaches up with both hands, grabbing my face, and pulls me down onto his chest and kisses me. Hard. His tongue invades my mouth and I can taste his desperation and need. Barely giving me a chance to breathe he rolls over, his lips locked to mine, so that he's pressing me into the four-poster's hard mattress. One of his hands clasps my jaw, the other spreads out on top of my head, keeping me still as his knee parts my legs and he nestles, still clothed in his jeans, between my thighs.

"Bella," he gasps, as if he can't believe I'm there with him. He gazes down at me for a split second, allowing me a moment to breathe. Then his lips are on mine again, plundering my mouth, taking all I have to give. He groans loudly, flexing his hips into me. His erection sheathed in denim pushing into my soft flesh. *Oh…* I moan, and all the pent-up sexual tension of earlier erupts, resurfacing with a vengeance, flushing my system with desire and need. Driven by his demons he urgently kisses my face, my eyes, my cheeks, along my jaw.

"I'm here," I whisper, trying to calm him, our heated, panting breath mingling. I wrap my arms around his shoulders, as unconsciously I grind my pelvis against his.

"Oh, Bella," he pants, his voice rough and low. "I need you."

"Me too," I whisper urgently, my body desperate for his touch. I want him. I want him now. I want to heal him. I want to reconnect. His hand reaches down and tugs at the buttons on his fly, fumbling momentarily, then freeing his erection.

Holy shit.

My heart lurches, as I fleetingly think I was asleep less than a minute ago. He shifts, staring down at me for a split second, suspended above me.

"Yes. Please," I breathe, my voice hoarse and needy.

And in one swift move he buries himself inside me.

"Ah!" I cry out, not from any pain, but from surprise at the suddenness of his lunge. He moans loudly and his lips find mine again as he pushes into me, over and over, his tongue possessing me too. He moves frantically, compelled by his fear, his lust, his desire, his – love, I don't know, but I meet him thrust for thrust, welcoming him.

"Bella," he growls almost inarticulately, and he comes powerfully, pouring himself into me, his face strained, his body rigid, before he collapses with his full weight onto me, panting, and he leaves me hanging… again.

Holy shit. This is not my night. My inner goddess is preparing to disembowel herself. I hold him, drawing in a lungful of air and practically writhing with need beneath him. He shakes his head and leans up on his elbows, taking some of his weight. He gazes down at me as if seeing me for the first time.

"Oh Bella. Jesus." He bends and kisses me tenderly.

"You okay?" I breathe, reaching up and caressing his lovely face.

He blinks at me and nods. He looks shaken and most definitely stirred; my own lost boy. He frowns and gazes intently into my eyes, as if finally registering where he is.

"You?" he asks, concern evident in his voice.

"Um…" I wriggle beneath him and after a moment he smiles, a slow carnal smile.

"Mrs Cullen, you have needs," he murmurs. He kisses me swiftly, then moves, withdrawing from me so that I wince. He scoots off the bed.

What?

Kneeling on the floor at the end of the bed he reaches up, grabs me just above the knees, and pulls me towards him so my behind is on the edge of the bed.

"Sit up," he murmurs. I struggle into a sitting position, my hair falling like a cloud around me, down to my breasts. His green gaze holds mine as he gently pushes my legs apart as far as they'll go. I lean back on my hands – knowing full well what he's going to do.

"You are so fucking beautiful, Bella," he breathes and I watch his copper haired head dip and plant a trail of kisses up my right thigh, heading north. My whole body clenches in anticipation. He glances up at me, his eyes darkening jade through long dark lashes.

"Watch," he breathes, then his mouth is on me.

Oh my. I cry out as the world is concentrated at the apex of my thighs, and it's so erotic – Fuck – watching him. Watching his tongue against what feels like the most sensitive part of my body. And he shows no mercy, teasing and taunting, worshipping me. My body tenses and my arms start to tremble from the strain of staying upright.

"No… ah," I murmur. Gently he eases one long finger inside me and I can bear no more, collapsing back onto the bed, relishing this mouth and fingers on and in me. Slowly and gently he massages that sweet, sweet spot, deep inside me. And that's it – I'm gone. I explode around him, crying out an incoherent rendition of his name, as my intense orgasm arches my back off the bed. I think I see stars. Such a visceral primal feeling… Vaguely I'm aware that he's nuzzling my belly, giving me soft, sweet kisses. Reaching down I caress his hair.

"I'm not finished with you yet," he murmurs. And before I've fully come back to Seattle, Planet Earth, he's reaching for me, gasping my hips and pulling me down off the bed.

What?

Kneeling at the foot of the bed he pulls me into his arms, into his waiting lap, and on to his waiting erection.

I gasp as he fills me. *Holy Cow…*

"Oh baby," he breathes, as he wraps his arms around me and stills, cradling my head and kissing my face. Very slightly he flexes his hips, and pleasure spikes hot and hard from deep within me. He reaches for my behind and lifts me, rocking his groin upwards.

"Ah…" I breathe, and his lips are on mine again as he slowly, oh so slowly, lifts and rocks… lifts and rocks. I throw my arms around his neck and moan, surrendering to his gentle rhythm and to wherever he'll take me. Oh, it's deep this way. I flex my thighs, riding him… he feels so good. I lean backwards and tilt my head back, my mouth open wide in a silent expression of my pleasure, reveling in his sweet possession.

"Bella," he breathes, and he leans down, kissing my throat. Holding me tight, slowly easing in and out, pushing me… higher and higher… so exquisitely timed – a fluid carnal force. Blissful pleasure radiates outwards from deep, deep inside me as he holds me so intimately.

“I love you, Bella,” he whispers close to my ear, his voice low and harsh, and he lifts me again, up, down, up down. I curl my hands back around his neck into his hair.

“I love you too, Edward.” Opening my eyes I find he’s gazing at me, and all I can see is his love, shining bright and bold in the soft glow of the playroom light, his nightmare seemingly forgotten. And as I feel my body build towards my release, I realize this is what I wanted – this connection, this demonstration of our love.

“Come for me, baby,” he breathes. I screw my eyes shut as my body tightens at the low sound of his voice, and I come loudly, spiraling into an intense climax, and he stills, his forehead against mine, as he softly whispers my name, wraps his arms around me and finds his own release.

.

He lifts me gently and lays me on the bed. I lie in his arms, wrung out and finally sated.

He nuzzles my neck.

“Better now?” he whispers.

“Hmmm.”

“Shall we go to bed, or do you want to sleep here?”

“Hmmm.”

I can feel his grin.

“Mrs Cullen, talk to me.”

“Hmmm.”

“Is that the best you can do?”

“Hmmm.”

“Come. Let me put you to bed. I don’t like sleeping here.”

Reluctantly, I shift and turn to face him.

“Wait,” I whisper.

He blinks at me, looking all wide-eyed and innocent, and at the same time thoroughly fucked and pleased with himself. How can he be so adorable sometimes?

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He nods, smiling smugly like an adolescent boy.

"I am now."

"Oh Edward," I scold, and reach up to gently stroke his lovely face. "I was talking about your nightmare."

His expression freezes momentarily, then he closes his eyes and tightens his arms around me, burying his face in my neck.

"Don't," he whispers, his voice hoarse and raw.

My heart lurches and twists once more in my chest, and I clutch him tightly, running my hands down his back and through his hair.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, alarmed by his reaction. Holy Fuck – how can I keep up with these mood swings? What the hell was his nightmare about? I don't want to cause him any more pain by making him relive the details. "It's okay," I murmur softly, desperate to bring him back to the playful boy of a moment ago. "It's okay," I repeat over and over, soothingly.

"Let's go to bed," he says quietly after a while, and he pulls away from me, leaving me empty and aching as he rises from the bed. I scramble after him, keeping the satin sheet wrapped around me, and bend to pick up my clothes.

"Leave those," he says and before I know it he scoops me up in his arms. "I don't want you to trip over this sheet and break your neck," he explains when I gape at him. I put my arms around his neck, marveling that he's recovered his composure, and nuzzle him as he carries me downstairs to our bedroom.

~o~

My eyes spring open. Something is wrong. Edward is not in bed, though it's still dark. Glancing at the radio alarm I can see it's 3.20 in the morning. Where's Edward? Then I hear the piano.

Quickly clambering out of bed I grab my robe and run down the hallway to the great room. The tune he's playing is so sad – a mournful lament. I pause in the doorway and watch him, in his pool of light, the achingly sorrowful music filling the room. He finishes, then starts the piece again. Why such a plaintive tune? I wrap my arms around myself and

listen spellbound as he plays. But my heart aches – oh Edward, why so sad? Is it because of me? Did I do this? When he finishes, only to start a third time, I can bear it no longer. Slowly I make my way towards him. He doesn't look up as I near the piano, but shifts to one side so I can sit beside him on the piano stool. He continues to play, and I put my head on his shoulder. He kisses my hair, but doesn't stop playing until he's finished the piece.

I glance up at him and he's staring down at me, warily.

"Did I wake you?" he asks.

"Only because you were gone. What's that piece called?"

"It's Chopin. It's one of his preludes in E minor," Edward pauses. "It's called Suffocation…"

I blink at him and reach over and take his hand. "You're really shaken by all this, aren't you?"

He snorts.

"A deranged asshole gets into my apartment to kidnap my wife. She won't do as she's told. She drives me crazy. She safewords on me." He closes his eyes briefly and when he opens them again, they are stark and cool. "Yeah, I'm pretty shaken up."

I squeeze his hand.

"I'm sorry."

He bends and presses his forehead against mine.

"I dreamt you were dead," he whispers.

What?

"Lying on the floor – so cold – and you wouldn't wake up."

Oh, Fifty.

"Hey – it was just a bad dream." Reaching up I clasp his head in my hands. His eyes burn into mine, and the anguish in them is sobering. "I'm here – and I'm cold without you in the bed. Come back to bed, please." I take his hand and stand, waiting to see if he'll follow me. Finally he stands too. He's wearing his pj bottoms, and they hang in that way he has,

and I want to run my fingers along the inside of his waistband… but I resist and lead him back to the bedroom.

~o~

When I wake he's curled around me sleeping peacefully. I relax and enjoy his heat against me, being enveloped by him, feeling his skin on my skin. I lie very still, not wanting to disturb him.

Boy, what an evening. I feel like I've been run over by a train – the freight train that is my husband. Hard to believe that the man lying beside me, looking so serene and young in his sleep, was so tortured last night… and so tortured me last night. I gaze up at the ceiling, and it occurs to me that I always think of Edward as strong and dominating – yet the reality is he's so fragile, my lost boy. And the irony is that he looks upon me as fragile – and I don't think I am. Compared to him I feel strong. But am I strong enough for both of us? Strong enough to do what I'm told, and give him some peace of mind? I sigh. He's not asking that much of me. I flit through our conversation of last night. Did we decide anything, other than to both try harder? The bottom line is that I love this man – my beautiful man, beautiful inside and out – and I need to chart a course for both of us. One that lets me keep my integrity and independence, but still be more for him. I am his *more*, and he is mine. I resolve to make a special effort this weekend not to give him cause for concern.

Edward stirs, and lifts his head off my chest, blinking sleepily at me.

"Good morning, Mr Cullen." I smile at him.

"Good morning, Mrs Cullen. Did you sleep well?" He stretches out beside me.

"Once my husband stopped making that terrible racket on the piano, yes I did."

He smiles his shy smile, and I melt.

"Terrible racket? I'll be sure to email Miss Kathie and let her know."

"Miss Kathie?"

"My piano teacher."

I giggle.

"That's a lovely sound," he breathes. "Shall we have a better day today?"

"Okay," I agree. "What do you want to do?"

"After I have made love to my wife, and she's cooked me breakfast, I'd like to take her to Aspen."

I gape at him.

"Aspen?"

"Yes."

"Aspen, Colorado?"

"The very same. Unless they've moved it."

I grin at him.

"You want me to cook you breakfast?"

"Oh yes."

"And you want to make love to me?"

"Can't you tell?"

I blush and giggle again.

"Won't it take hours to get to Colorado?"

"Not by jet," he says silkily, as his hand runs teasingly up my thigh.

Of course – my husband has a jet. How could I forget? His hand continues to skim up my body, lifting my night dress as it goes, and soon I've forgotten everything.

~o~

Taylor drives us on to the tarmac at Sea Tac and round to where the CEH jet is waiting. It's a grey day in Seattle, but I refuse to let the weather dampen my spirits. Edward is in a much better mood today – he's excited about something, I can tell. He's lit up like Christmas, and twitching like a small boy with a big secret. I wonder what scheme he's dreamt up. He looks dreamy – all tousled hair, white t-shirt and black jeans – not CEO-like at all today. He takes my hand as Taylor glides to a stop at foot of the jet steps.

"I have a surprise for you," he murmurs, and he kisses my knuckles.

I grin at him.

"Good surprise?"

"I hope so," he smiles warmly.

Hmmm… what can it be?

Stuart leaps out from the front and opens my door. Taylor opens Edward's, then retrieves our cases from the trunk. Edward takes my hand and leads me up the stairs to where Stephan is waiting. I glance into the cockpit to see First Officer Beighley flipping switches on the imposing instrument panel.

Edward and Stephan shake hands.

"Good morning sir," Stephan beams at Edward.

"Thanks for doing this at such short notice," Edward grins back at him. "Our guests here?"

"Yes sir," Stephan replies.

Guests?

I turn and gasp. Rose, Emmett, Alice and Jasper are all seated in the cream leather seats, beaming at us.

Holy Cow! My eyes whip to Edward's.

"Surprise!" he says softly.

"How? When? Who?" I mumble inarticulately, trying to contain my delight and elation.

"You said you didn't see enough of your friends." He shrugs and gives me a lopsided, apologetic smile.

"Oh Edward – thank you." I throw my arms around his neck and kiss him hard, in front of everyone. He puts his hands on my hips, hooking his thumbs into the belt loops of my jeans, and deepens the kiss.

Oh my.

"Keep this up and I'll drag you into the bedroom," he murmurs.

"You wouldn't dare," I whisper against his lips.

“Oh, Isabella,” he grins, shaking his head. He releases me, and without any further preamble stoops down, grabs my thighs, and lifts me over his shoulder.

I scream.

“Edward, put me down!” I smack his behind.

I briefly catch Stephan’s smile as he turns and heads into the cockpit. Taylor is standing at the doorway trying to stifle his grin. Ignoring my pleas and my futile struggles Edward strides through the cabin past where Emmett is whooping like a demented gibbon.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he says to our four guests, “I need to have a word with my wife in private.”

“Edward!” I shout. “Put me down!”

“All in good time, baby.”

I have a brief view of Alice, Rose and Emmett all laughing. Dammit! This is not funny, it’s embarrassing. Jasper gawks at us, mouth open and utterly shocked, as we disappear into the cabin.

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Edward closes the cabin door behind him and releases me, letting me slide down his body – slowly, so I can feel every hard sinew and muscle. He grins down at me boyishly, pleased with himself.

"That was quite a show, Mr Cullen," I murmur, crossing my arms and regarding him with faux indignation.

"That was fun, Mrs Cullen." And his grin widens… oh boy. He looks so young.

"Are you going to follow through?" I arch a brow, unsure how I feel about this. I mean – the others will hear us, for heaven's sake. And I suddenly feel shy. Glancing anxiously at the bed I feel a blush steal across my cheeks, as I recall our wedding night. We talked so much yesterday, did so much yesterday… I feel as if we leapt some unknown hurdle – but that's the problem. It's unknown. My eyes find Edward's intense but amused gaze, and I'm unable to keep a straight face – his grin is too infectious.

"I think it might be rude to keep our guests waiting," he says silkily as he steps towards me. Oh… when did he start to care what people think? I step back against the cabin wall and he imprisons me, the heat from his body holding me in place. He leans down and runs his nose along mine.

"Good surprise?" he whispers, and there's a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"Oh Edward, fantastic surprise." I run my hands up his chest, curl them around his neck and kiss him.

"When did you organize this?" I ask shyly when I pull away from him, softly stroking his hair.

"Last night, when I couldn't sleep. I emailed Em and Alice, and here they are."

"It's very thoughtful – thank you. I'm sure we'll have a great time."

"I hope so. I thought it would be easier to avoid the press in Aspen than at home."

The paps! He's right. If we'd stayed in Escala we'd have been imprisoned. A shiver runs down my spine as I recollect the snapping cameras and dazzling flashguns of the swarming photographers Taylor sped through this morning.

"Come. We'd better take our seats – Stephan will be taking off shortly." He offers me his hand and together we walk back into the cabin.

Emmett cheers as we enter.

"That sure was speedy in-flight service!" he calls mockingly.

Edward ignores him.

"Please be seated, ladies and gentlemen, as we'll shortly be taxiing for take-off." Stephan's voice echoes calmly and authoritatively around the cabin. The brunette woman – um… Natalie? who was on the flight for our wedding night – appears from the galley and gathers up the discarded coffee cups. Natalia… Her name's Natalia.

"Good morning Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen," she purrs. Why does she make me uncomfortable? Maybe it's that she's a brunette. By his own admission Edward doesn't usually employ brunettes, because he finds them attractive. He gives Natalia a polite smile as he sits down opposite Emmett and Rose. I swiftly hug Rose and Alice and give Jasper and Emmett a wave before sitting down and buckling up beside Edward. He puts his hand on my knee and gives it an affectionate squeeze. He seems relaxed and happy, even though we're in company. Idly I wonder why he can't always be like this – not controlling at all.

"Hope you packed your hiking boots," he says, his voice warm.

"We're not going ski-ing?"

"That would be a challenge, in August," he says, amused.

Oh – of course.

"Do you ski, Bella?" Emmett interrupts us.

"No."

Edward moves his hand from my knee to clasp my hand.

"I'm sure my little brother can teach you." Emmett winks at me. "He's pretty fast on the slopes, too."

And I can't help my blush. When I glance up at Edward he's gazing impassively at Emmett, but I think he's trying to suppress his mirth. The plane surges forward and starts taxiing towards the runway.

Quickly and efficiently Natalia runs through the plane's safety procedures in a clear ringing voice. She's dressed in a navy blue short-sleeved shirt and matching pencil skirt. Her make-up is immaculate – she really is quite pretty. My subconscious raises a plucked-to-within-an-inch-of-its-life eyebrow at me.

"You okay?" Rose asks me pointedly. "I mean, following the Smith business?"

I nod. I don't want to think or talk about Smith, but Rose seems to have other plans.

"So why did he go postal?" she asks, cutting to the heart of the matter in her inimitable style. She tosses her long blond hair behind her as she prepares to investigate the matter. Eyeing her coolly, Edward shrugs.

"I fired his ass," he says bluntly.

"Oh? Why?" Rose tilts her head to one side, and I know she's in full Nancy Drew mode.

"He made at pass at me," I mutter. I try to kick Rose's ankle beneath the table, and miss. Shit!

"When?" Rose glares at me.

"Ages ago."

"You never told me he made a pass at you!" she splutters.

I shrug, apologetically.

"It can't just be a grudge about that, surely. I mean his reaction is way too extreme," Rose continues, but now she directs her questions at Edward. "Is he mentally stable? What about all the information he has on you Cullens?" Her grilling Edward this way makes my hackles rise, but she's already established I know nothing. The thought is momentarily annoying.

"We think there's a connection with Detroit," Edward says mildly. Too mildly. Oh no… *Rose – please give it up for now.*

"Smith is from Detroit too?" she persists.

Edward nods.

The plane accelerates, and I tighten my grip on Edward's hand. He glances at me anxiously. He knows I hate take-offs and landings, especially in the Gulfstream jet. He squeezes my hand and his thumb strokes my knuckles reassuringly.

"What *do* you know about him?" Emmett asks, oblivious to the fact we are hurtling down the runway in a small jet about to launch itself into the sky, and equally oblivious to Edward's growing exasperation with Rose. Rose leans forward, listening attentively.

"This is off the record," Edward says directly to her. Rose's mouth sets in a subtle but thin line. I swallow. Oh shit.

"We know a little about him," Edward continues. "His dad died in a brawl in a bar. His mother drank herself into oblivion. He was in and out of foster homes as a kid, in and out of trouble too – mainly boosting cars. Spent time in juvie. His mom got back on track through some outreach program, and Smith turned himself around. Won a scholarship to Princeton."

"Princeton?" Rose's curiosity is piqued.

"Yep. He's a bright boy." Edward shrugs.

"Not that bright. He got caught," Emmett mutters.

"But surely he can't have pulled this stunt alone?" Rose asks.

Edward stiffens beside me.

"We don't know yet." His voice is very quiet.

Holy crap. There could be someone working with him? I turn and gape in horror at Edward. He squeezes my hand once more, but doesn't look me in the eye. The plane lifts smoothly into the air, and I get that horrible sinking feeling… Most of me wishes I was still on the ground.

"How old is he?" I ask Edward, leaning close so only he can hear. Much as I'd like to know what's going on, I don't want to encourage Rose's questions. I know they're irritating Edward, and I'm sure she's on his shit-list since Cocktailgate.

"Thirty-two. Why?"

"Curious, that's all."

Edward's jaw tightens.

"Don't be curious about Smith. I'm just glad the fucker's locked up." It's almost a reprimand, but I choose to ignore his tone.

"Do *you* think he's working with someone?" I ask. The thought that someone else might be involved makes me sick. It would mean this isn't over.

"I don't know," Edward answers, and his jaw tightens once more.

"Maybe someone who has a grudge against you?" I suggest. Holy shit – I hope it's not the bitch troll. "Like Irina?" I whisper. I realize I've muttered her name out loud – but only he can hear. I glance anxiously at Rose, but she's deep in conversation with Emmett. Emmett looks pissed at her. Hmmm…

"You do like to demonize her, don't you?" Edward rolls his eyes and shakes his head in disgust. "She may hold a grudge, but she wouldn't do this kind of thing." He pins me with a steady green gaze. "Let's not discuss her. I know she's not your favorite topic of conversation."

"Have you confronted her?" I whisper, not sure if I really want to know.

"Bella, I haven't spoken to her since my birthday party. Please, drop it. I don't want to talk about her." He raises my hand and brushes my knuckles with his lips. His green eyes burn into mine and I know this is not a line of questioning I should pursue right now.

"Get a room," Emmett teases. "Oh right – you already have, but you didn't need it for long." He smirks.

Edward glances up and pins Emmett with a cool glare.

" Fuck off, Em," he says without malice.

"Dude, just telling you how it is." Emmett's eyes light up with mirth.

"Like you'd know," Edward murmurs sardonically, raising an eyebrow.

Emmett grins, enjoying the banter.

"You married your first girlfriend." Emmett gestures at me.

Oh shit. Where is this going? I flush.

"Can you blame me?" Edward kisses my hand again.

"No," Emmett laughs and shakes his head.

I flush, and Rose slaps Emmett's thigh.

"Stop being an ass," she scolds him.

"Listen to your girlfriend," Edward says to Emmett, grinning, his earlier concern no longer evident. My ears pop as we gain altitude, and the tension between all of us dissipates as the

plane levels out. Rose scowls at Emmett. Hmmm… something up between them? I'm not sure.

But Emmett is right. I snort at the irony. I am – was – Edward's first girlfriend, and now I'm his wife. The fifteen, and the evil Mrs Robinson – they don't count. But then Emmett doesn't know about them, and clearly Rose hasn't told him. I smile at her, and she gives me a conspiratorial wink. My secrets are safe with Rose.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen, we'll be cruising at an altitude of approximately 32,000 feet, and our estimated flight time is 1 hour and 56 minutes," Stephan announces. "You are now free to move about the cabin."

Alice immediately unbuckles her belt and comes bounding down to join us. She perches on the walnut storage cabinet opposite our seats. Looking down the cabin I see Jasper is engrossed in the Seattle Times, and further to the front Taylor sitting reading his book – Machiavelli's The Prince. He really has the most eclectic and unexpected literary taste. Glancing up Taylor catches me staring at him, and offers me his avuncular smile. I'm instantly reassured because he's here with us… I wonder if Mrs Cope minds. I smile back, then turn to face Alice.

"This is going to be so much fun!" She claps her hands in glee. "Are you okay, Bella? Ugh, that horrible guy – what the hell was he thinking? Edward, do you have anything planned? I wonder who's playing at Belly Up? Or maybe we could go to the Lava Lounge – oh, please? That would be so much fun. What do you think?" Alice bats her long lashes at her brother.

"Alice," Edward mutters, exasperated anew, "I haven't made any plans – apart from lunch when we arrive." He turns to look at me. "I thought we might go for a hike. Depending on the weather." He shrugs. "But it's up to you. What do you want to do?"

"Bella doesn't know what's there. You want to go clubbing don't you?" Alice looks at me, big brown eyes pleading, and I can't help but giggle. Her enthusiasm knows no bounds.

"Whatever," I grin.

Natalia appears from the galley.

"Can I offer anyone coffee?" she asks.

~o~

We land smoothly at Sardy Field at 12.25 MST. Stephan brings the plane to a halt a little way from the main terminal, and through the windows I can see a large VW minivan waiting for us.

Edward shakes Stephan's hand as we get ready to file out of the jet.

"Good landing," he grins.

"Thank you sir. It's all about the density altitude," Stephan smiles back. "Beighley here is good at math."

Edward nods at Stephan's first officer.

"You obviously got it spot on, Beighley – smooth landing," Edward says.

She beams at us both, and I beam back, though I have no idea what they're talking about.

"Enjoy your weekend sir, Mrs Cullen. We'll see you tomorrow." Stephan steps aside to let us disembark. Taking my hand Edward leads me down the aircraft steps to the waiting bus. Taylor precedes us and slides open the door.

"Minivan?" says Edward in surprise to Taylor.

Taylor gives him a tight contrite smile and a slight shrug.

"Last minute, I know," Edward says, immediately placated. Taylor returns to the plane to retrieve our luggage.

"Want to make out in the back of the bus?" Edward murmurs to me.

I giggle. Who is this man, and what has he done with Mr Unbelievably Angry of the last few days?

"Are we going?" Alice says from behind us, oozing impatience. She's hand in hand with Jasper. We clamber in and make our way to the double seat at the back. We sit down and I snuggle against Edward. He puts his arm around the back of my seat. In spite of being crammed into a minivan he looks carefree and at ease.

"Comfortable?" he murmurs to me as Alice and Jasper take the seat in front of us.

"Yes." I smile up at him and he kisses my forehead. I don't understand why I feel so shy with him today.

Emmett and Rose clamber in last as Taylor opens the tailgate to load the luggage. Five minutes later we are on our way. Jasper turns and asks,

"Have you been to Aspen before, Bella?"

"No, first time. You?"

"Rose and I used to come here a lot when we were teens. Dad's a keen skier. Mom less so."

"Maybe Edward will teach me how to ski," I smile shyly up at my husband.

"Don't bet on it," Edward mutters, shuddering in mock horror. "The thought of you on skis."

"I won't be that bad!" I try to look affronted.

"You might break your neck," he whispers, his grin gone.

Oh…

"Maybe if I just stick to the bunny slopes?" I don't want to argue and sour his good mood, so I change the subject. "How long have you had this place?"

"Nearly two years. It's yours now too," he says softly.

I lean up and kiss his jaw. Hmm, he smells so good. I nestle against him, listening to him laugh and joke with Jasper and Emmett. They are discussing fishing. I shake my head at the coincidence… I married a man who likes fishing – just like my Dad. Alice chimes in occasionally, but Rose is quiet, and I wonder if she's brooding about James Smith – or something else. Then I remember. Aspen… Edward's house here was redesigned – or rebuilt, I can't remember which – by Tanya Denali. Edward mentioned it in passing, before we met her to discuss plans for the new house. I wonder if that's what's preoccupying Rose – but I don't want to ask her in front of Emmett, given his history with Tanya. Does Rose even know about her connection to the house?

As we head towards Aspen I glance out of the window. The trees are green, though a whisper of the coming Fall is evident here and there in the yellowing tips of the leaves. The sky is a clear crystal blue, though there are darkening clouds to the west of us. All around us in the distance loom the Rockies, the highest peak directly ahead of us. They're lush and green, and the furthest ones are capped with snow, like a child's drawing of what mountains should be. The winter playground of the rich and famous… and I own a house here. I can barely believe it. And unbidden, from deep within, rises the familiar unease I always feel when I try to wrap my head around Edward's wealth. For

some reason it makes me feel guilty. What have I done to deserve this lifestyle? I shake my head, not wanting to dwell on this ever-present anxiety.

We drive along Aspen's main street. It's an eclectic mix –squat buildings of mostly red brick, Swiss-style chalets, and lots of little turn of the century houses painted in fun colors. Plenty of banks and designer shops too, betraying the affluence of the local populace. Of course Edward fits in here.

"Why did you choose Aspen?" I ask.

"What?" he asks, cocking his head to one side.

"To buy a place."

"Mom and Dad used to bring us here when we were kids. I learned to ski here. I like the place. I hope you do too – otherwise we'll sell the house and choose somewhere else."

Oh! Simple as that. I blink at him and he tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"You look lovely today," he says softly.

I flush. I'm just in jeans and t-shirt, with a lightweight navy blue jacket – my traveling gear. Why does he make me feel shy? He leans down and kisses me, a soft sweet loving kiss.

Taylor takes us on out of town and we start to climb the other side of the valley, twisting along a mountain road. As we continue to climb I get more and more excited, and I feel Edward tensing beside me.

"What's wrong?" I ask as we round a bend.

"I hope you like it," he says quietly, his green eyes wide. "We're here."

Taylor slows, indicates and turns through a gateway of rough, grey, sandy and red stones. He heads down the driveway and finally pulls up outside the impressively sized house. Double fronted, with high-pitched roofs, built of the same mixed stone as the gateway and dark, dark wood – it's stunning. Modern and stark, very much Edward's style.

"Home," he mouths at me as our guests start piling out of the van.

"Looks good," I murmur.

"Come. See," he says, an excited though anxious gleam in his eyes – like he's about to show me his science project, or something.

Alice runs up the steps to where an older, raven-haired woman stands in the doorway. She's tiny and her hair is dusted with gray. Alice flings her arms around her neck and hugs her tightly.

"Who's that?" I ask as Edward helps me out of the van.

"Mrs Bentley. She lives here with her husband. They look after the place."

Holy cow… more staff?

Alice is making introductions – Jasper, then Rose. Emmett too hugs Mrs Bentley. As Taylor unloads the van Edward takes my hand and leads me to the front door.

"Welcome back, Mr Cullen," Mrs Bentley beams.

"Carmella, this is my wife, Isabella," Edward says proudly. His tongue caresses my name, making my heart stutter.

"Mrs Cullen," Mrs Bentley – um, Carmella – nods a respectful greeting at me. I hold out my hand and we shake. She's much more formal with Edward than the rest of the family. This does not surprise me.

"I hope you had a pleasant flight. The weather is supposed to be fine all weekend, though I'm not sure." She eyes the graying clouds behind us. "Lunch is ready for whenever you want," she smiles, her dark eyes twinkling. I warm to her immediately.

"Here – " Edward grabs me and lifts me off my feet.

"What are you doing?" I squeal.

"Carrying you over yet another threshold, Mrs Cullen."

I grin at him as he carries me into the wide hallway, and after a brief kiss, sets me gently down onto the hardwood floor. The interior décor is stark and reminds me of the great room at Escala – all white walls, dark wood, and contemporary abstract art. The hallway opens out on to a large sitting area where three off-white leather couches surround a stone fireplace that dominates the room. The only color is from the soft cushions scattered on the couches. Alice grabs Jasper's hand and drags him out of the communal room, further into the house. Edward narrows his eyes at their departing figures, his mouth settling into a hard line. He shakes his head then turns to me.

Rose whistles loudly.

"Nice place," she says to Edward. I glance round to see Emmett helping Taylor with our luggage. I wonder again if she knows that Tanya had a hand in this place.

"Tour?" Edward asks me, and whatever was going through his mind about Alice and Jasper seems to have been forgotten. He's radiating excitement – or is it anxiety? It's difficult to tell.

"Sure," I murmur. Once again I'm overwhelmed by the wealth I am facing. How much did this place cost? It makes me feel small and insignificant, aware that I have contributed nothing to this… and briefly I'm brought back to the first time Edward took me to Escala. I was overwhelmed then. *You got used to it,* my subconscious hisses at me.

Edward frowns but takes my hand, leading me through the various rooms. The state-of-the-art kitchen is all pale marble countertops and black cupboards. There's an impressive wine cellar, and an expansive den downstairs, complete with large plasma screen, soft couches… and a billiard table. I stare at it, and flush when Edward catches me.

"Fancy a game?" he asks, a wicked gleam in his eye. I shake my head, and his brow furrows once more. Taking my hand again, he leads me up to the first floor. There are four bedrooms upstairs, each with an ensuite bathroom.

The master suite is something else – the bed is huge, bigger than the bed at home, and faces an enormous picture window looking out over Aspen and towards the verdant mountains.

"That's Ajax Mountain… or Aspen Mountain, if you like." Edward says, eyeing me warily. He's standing in the doorway, his thumbs hooked through the belt loops on his black jeans.

I nod.

"You're very quiet," he murmurs.

"It's lovely, Edward," I reply. And suddenly I'm aching to be back at Escala.

In five long strides he's standing in front of me, reaching up and tugging at my chin, releasing my lower lip from the grip of my teeth.

"What is it?" he asks, his eyes searching mine.

"You're very rich," I murmur.

"Yes," he says.

"Sometimes – it just takes me by surprise, how wealthy you are."

"We are," he corrects me.

"We are," I mutter automatically.

"Don't stress this, Bella, please. It's just a house."

"And what did Tanya do here, exactly?"

He raises his eyebrows in surprise.

"Tanya?"

"Yes. She remodeled this place?" I prompt.

"She did. She put the den in downstairs." He rakes his hand through his hair and frowns at me. "Why are we talking about Tanya? You've dealt with her."

"Did you know she had a fling with Emmett?"

Edward gazes at me for a moment.

"Emmett's fucked most of Seattle, Bella."

I gasp.

"Mainly women, I understand," Edward whispers jokingly. I think he's amused by my expression.

"No!"

Edward nods.

"But it's none of my business." He holds his palms up.

"I don't think Rose knows," I breathe.

"I'm not sure he broadcasts that information. Rose seems to be holding her own."

I am shocked. Sweet, unassuming, curly-haired, blue-eyed Emmett? I stare in disbelief. Edward tilts his head to one side, scrutinizing me.

"This can't just be about Tanya, or Emmett's promiscuity."

"I know. I'm sorry. After all that's happened this week, it's just…" I shrug, feeling tearful all of a sudden. Edward seems to sag with relief. Pulling me into his arms he holds me tightly, his nose in my hair.

"I know. I'm sorry too. Let's relax and enjoy ourselves, okay? You can stay here and read, watch god-awful TV, shop, come hiking – fishing even. Whatever you want to do," he murmurs. "And forget what I said about Emmett. That was indiscreet of me."

"Goes some way to explain why he's always teasing you," I murmur, nuzzling his chest.

"He really has no idea about my past. I told you, my family assumed I was gay. Celibate, but gay."

I giggle, and begin to relax in his arms.

"I thought you were celibate. How wrong we were." I wrap my arms around him, marveling at the ridiculousness of gay Edward.

"Mrs Cullen, are you smirking at me?"

"Maybe a little," I acquiesce. "You know, the thing I can't get my head round is – why do you have this place?"

"What do you mean?" He kisses my hair.

"You have the boat, which I understand, you have the place in New York for business – but why here? It's not like you shared it with anyone."

Edward stills, and is silent for several beats.

"I was waiting for you," he says softly.

I gaze up at him, and his eyes are dark green and burning with sincerity.

"Edward," I breathe, "that's… that's such a lovely thing to say."

"It's true. I didn't know it at the time." He smiles his shy smile.

"I'm glad you waited."

"You are worth waiting for, Mrs Cullen." He tips my chin back with his finger, leans down and kisses me tenderly.

"So are you," I breathe, smiling up at him. "Though I feel I like I cheated. I didn't have to wait long for you at all."

He grins.

"Am I that much of a prize?"

"Edward, you are the state lottery, the cure for cancer and the three wishes from Aladdin's lamp all rolled into one."

He raises a brow.

"When will you realize this?" I scold him. "You were a very eligible bachelor. And I don't mean all this – " I wave dismissingly at our plush surroundings. "I mean in here." I place my hand over his heart, and his eyes widen. My confident, sexy husband has gone and I'm facing my lost boy. "Believe me Edward, please," I whisper, and reach up to clasp his face, pulling his lips to mine. He groans softly, and I don't know if it's the pain of hearing what I have to say, or his usual primal response. I claim him, my lips moving against his, my tongue invading his mouth.

When we're both breathless he pulls away, eyeing me doubtfully.

"When are you going to get in through you exceptionally thick skull that I love you?" I ask, exasperated.

He swallows.

"One day," he says. I gaze at him… this is progress. I smile, and am rewarded with his answering shy smile.

"Come. Let's have some lunch – the others will be wondering where we are. We can discuss what we all want to do."

~o~

Mrs Bentley has served up an Italian feast – a mixed antipasto, consisting of a platter of cold meats, roasted halved peppers filled with pesto, fresh green bean salad with mint, caponata, oven-roasted tomatoes, buffalo mozzarella, artichokes and olives served with warm focaccia bread – and we have consumed it. Yet in spite of the fact I have eaten so much, I feel lighter. Happier. This is my home too. All I have to remember is one simple rule – my home is wherever Edward is.

The banter around the large dark wood table has been light and funny. Over the last hour or so I have laughed a lot and drunk two large glasses of Frascati. Just Edward and I are

drinking white wine – the others favor red. My only concern is Rose and Emmett. Something's going on between them. They are relaxed with all of us, but not with each other. I glance at my husband. They're a little like Edward and me, tiptoeing around each other. I smile at Edward and he gives me a questioning look. Hmm… I am definitely feeling the effects of this wine.

"Thank you Mrs B, that was delicious." Emmett raises his glass of Californian Shiraz to Mrs Bentley as she clears the table.

"You are most welcome, Emmett," Mrs B smiles.

Edward too raises his glass to her, and she flushes under his warm approval.

"Oh no!" Rose says suddenly.

All eyes turn to her.

"Look," she says pointing to the picture window. Outside rain has started pouring down.

"There goes our hike," Emmett mutters, sounding vaguely relieved.

"We could go into town," Alice pipes up.

"Perfect weather for fishing," Edward says.

What is it with him and fishing?

"I'll go fish," Jasper responds.

"Let's split up." Alice claps her hands. "Girls, shopping – boys, outdoor boring stuff."

I glance at Rose, who regards Alice indulgently. Fishing or shopping – Jeez, what a choice.

"Bella, what do you want to do?" Edward asks.

"I don't mind," I lie. Alice catches my eye, and presses her hands together in a silent plea. "But I'm more than happy to go shopping," I add, smiling wryly at Alice. Edward smirks. He knows I hate shopping.

"I can stay here with you, if you'd like," he murmurs and something dark unfurls in my belly at his tone.

"No, you go fish," I answer. Edward needs boy time.

"Sounds like a plan," Rose says, rising from the table.

Emmett frowns briefly.

"I'll take you girls into town. I need to pick something up… a battery for my watch." He glances very quickly at Rose, and I see him flush, ever so slightly. She doesn't notice.

"Taylor will accompany you," Edward says, and it's a given – not up for discussion.

"We don't need babysitting," Rose retorts bluntly, as direct as ever.

I put my hand on Rose's arm.

"Rose, Taylor should come," I murmur. She frowns at me, then shrugs, and for once in her life holds her tongue. I smile timidly at Edward. His expression remains impassive. Oh, I hope he's not mad at Rose.

"Take the Merc, Em. When you can come back we can go fishing," Edward says.

"Yeah!" Emmett mutters, but he seems distracted. "Good plan."

~o~

"In here." Grabbing my hand Alice hauls me into a designer boutique that's all pink silk and faux-French distressed rustic furniture. Rose follows us while Taylor waits outside, sheltering under the awning from the rain. During our drive into town Rose tried to engage Taylor in conversation, but much to my amusement he remained polite but tight-lipped. Rose seems to have relaxed, and I wonder once more what's up with her and Emmett. Aretha is belting out *Say A Little Prayer* over the store's hi-fi system… I love this song. I should put it on Edward's iPod.

"This will look wonderful on you, Bella." Alice holds up a scrap of silver material. "Here, try it on."

"Um… it's a bit short."

"You'll look fantastic in it. Edward will love it."

"You think?"

Alice beams at me.

"Bella, you have legs to die for, and if we go clubbing tonight – " she smiles, sensing an easy kill " – You'll look hot for your husband."

I blink at her, slightly shocked. However, she has a point. I don't think I've bought anything to go 'clubbing' in. I don't go clubbing.

"Go try it on," Alice orders, and reluctantly I head for the changing room.

~o~

While I wait for Rose and Alice to emerge from the changing rooms I stroll to the shop window and look out, unseeing, across the main street. The soul compilation continues: Dionne Warwick is singing *Walk On By*. Another great song – one of my mother's favorites. I glance down at The Dress in my hand. 'Dress' is perhaps an overstatement. It's backless, and very short, but Alice has declared it a winner, perfect for dancing the night away. Apparently I need shoes too, and a large chunky necklace, which we'll source next. I roll my eyes, reflecting once more on how lucky I am to have Caroline Acton.

I'm distracted by the sight of Emmett. He has appeared on the other side of the leafy main street, climbing out of a large Mercedes, not unlike the one Taylor usually drives. Emmett dives into a store, as if to duck out of the rain. Looks like a jewelry store… maybe he's looking for that watch battery. He emerges a few minutes later, and not alone – with a woman.

Fuck! He's talking to Tanya!

What the hell is she doing here? As I watch they hug briefly, and she holds her head back, laughing animatedly at something he says. He kisses her cheek, then runs to the waiting car. She turns and heads down the street, and I gape after her. What was that about? I turn anxiously towards the changing rooms, but there's still no sign of Rose or Alice.

I glance at Taylor, noticing him waiting outside the storefront. He catches my eye, then shrugs – he witnessed Emmett's little encounter too. I flush, embarrassed to have been caught snooping. Turning back I see Alice and Rose emerge from the dressing rooms, both of them laughing. Rose looks at me quizzically.

"What's wrong, Bella?" she asks. "You gone cold on the dress? You look sensational in it."

"Um, no."

"Are you okay?" Rose's eyes widen.

"I'm fine. Shall we pay?"

I head to the cashier's desk, joining Alice who has chosen two skirts.

"Good afternoon, ma'am." The young sales assistant – who has more gloss coating her lips than I have ever seen in one place – smiles at me. "That'll be eight hundred and fifty dollars."

What? For this scrap of material! I blink at her, and meekly hand over my black Amex.

"Mrs Cullen," Ms Lip-Gloss purrs.

I follow Rose and Alice in a daze for the next two hours, warring with myself. Should I tell Rose? My subconscious firmly shakes her head. Yes, I should tell her. No I shouldn't. It could just have been an innocent meeting… Shit. What should I do?

"Well, do you like the shoes, Bella?" Alice has her fists on her hips.

"Um… yeah, sure."

I end up with a pair of unfeasibly high Manolo Blahniks with straps that look like they are made from mirrors. They match the dress perfectly, and they set Edward back just over a thousand dollars. Also a long silver chain – a bargain at eighty-four dollars.

"Getting used to having money?" Rose asks, not unkindly, as we walk back to the car. Alice has skipped ahead.

"You know this isn't me, Rose. I'm kind of uncomfortable about all this. But I'm reliably informed it's part of the package." I purse my lips at her, and she puts her arm around me.

"You'll get used to it Bella," she says sympathetically. "You'll look great."

"Rose, how are you and Em getting along?" I ask. Her wide blue eyes dart to mine.

Oh no.

She shakes her head.

"I don't want to talk about it now." She motions with her mouth towards Alice. "But things are – " She doesn't finish her sentence. This is unlike my tenacious Rose. Shit. Do I tell her? Tell her I saw – what? Emmett and Miss Well-Groomed-Sexual-Predator talking, hugging… and that kiss on the cheek. Surely they are just old friends? No, I won't tell her. Not right now. I give her my I-completely-understand-and-will-respect-your-privacy nod. She reaches for my hand and gives it a grateful squeeze, and there it is – a swift glimpse of pain and hurt in her eyes, that she quickly stifles with a blink. In that moment I feel a surge of protectiveness for my dear friend. What the fuck is Emmett Manwhore Cullen playing at?

~o~

Alice has finally sensed the atmosphere in the car.

"You guys okay?"

"Sure," I grin, and catch Taylor's glance at me in the review mirror.

"Yes, fine," says Rose, with forced brightness. "So, let's have a cocktail when we get in. After all this shopping I think we deserve it."

We arrive back at the house we find we're alone except for Mrs Bentley, who lets us in. When she discovers we want cocktails she offers to mix us drinks. Rose refuses, but lets Mrs Bentley hand her the makings for strawberry daiquiris. Then she disappears, leaving the three of us in the kitchen area. Rose mixes one mother of a cocktail, and while Alice goes to put away her purchases we curl up on the couches in front of the fire.

"Emmett has just been a little distant lately," Rose murmurs, gazing into the flames.

"Oh?"

"I think I'm in trouble, for getting you into trouble," she adds.

"You heard about that?"

"Yes. Edward called Emmett, Emmett called me."

I roll my eyes. *Oh Fifty, Fifty, Fifty.*

"I'm sorry. Edward is… protective. You haven't been with Emmett since the infamous cosmopolitan evening?"

"No."

"Oh."

"I really like him, Bella," she whispers. And for one dreadful minute I think she's going to cry. Oh no… does this mean the return of the pink pajamas? She turns to gaze at me.

"I've fallen in love with him."

Oh.

"At first I thought it was just the great sex. But he's charming, and kind, and warm, and funny. I could see us growing old together – grand-kids and everything."

"Your happy ever after," I whisper.

She nods sadly.

"Maybe you should talk to him. Try and find some alone time here. Find out what's eating him."

Who's eating him, my subconscious snarls. I slap her down, shocked at the waywardness of my own thoughts.

"Perhaps you guys could go for a walk tomorrow morning?"

"We'll see."

"Rose, I hate seeing you like this."

She smiles weakly, and I lean over to hug her. I resolve not to mention Tanya… though I might mention it to the Manwhore himself. How can he fuck with my friend's affections like this?

Alice returns, and we move on to safer territory.

~o~

I notice that the fire is dying down, and we're almost out of wood. Even though it's summer, the fire is very welcome on this wet day.

"Alice, do you know where the wood for the fire is kept?" I ask.

"I think it's in the garage."

"I'll go fetch some. It'll give me an opportunity to explore."

The rain has eased off when I venture outside and head to the three-car garage adjoining the house. The side door is unlocked and I enter, switching on the light to fight the gloom. The fluorescent strips ping noisily into life.

There's a car in the garage, another Mercedes, and I realize it's the same car I saw Emmett clambering out of this afternoon. There are also two snowmobiles. But the things that really grab my attention are the two trail bikes, both 125 cc. Memories of Jake, bravely

endeavoring to teach me how to ride, flash through my mind. Unconsciously I rub my arm where I badly bruised it in a fall.

"You ride?" says Emmett behind me.

I whirl round.

"You're back."

"It would appear so," he grins, and I realize that Edward might say the same thing to me – but without the huge, heart-melting grin. "Well?" he asks. *Manwhore!*

"Sort of."

"Do you want a go?"

I snort.

"Um, no… I don't think Edward would be very happy if I did."

"Edward's not here." Emmett smirks – oh, it's a family trait – and waves his arm to indicate we're alone. He strolls towards the nearest bike and swings a long leg over the saddle, sitting astride and grabbing the handlebars.

"Edward has um… issues about my safety. I shouldn't."

"You always do what he says?" Emmett breathes, a wicked sparkle in his baby-blue eyes. I can see a glimmer of the bad boy… the bad boy Rose has fallen in love with. The bad boy from Detroit.

"No." I arch an admonishing brow at him. "But I'm trying to put that right. He has enough to worry about without adding me to the mix. Is he back?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't go fishing?"

Emmett shakes his head.

"I had some business to deal with in town."

Business! Holy Shit – Strawberry blond business! I inhale sharply and gape at him.

"There you are. Oh Em – you're back." Rose joins us.

"Hey baby." He smiles broadly.

"Catch anything?"

I scrutinize Emmett's reaction.

"No. I had a few things to take care of in town." And for one brief moment I see a flash of uncertainty cross his face.

Oh Shit.

"I came out to see what was keeping Bella." Rose looks at each of us, confused.

"What are you looking for in here?" Emmett asks me, and suddenly I sense it – the tension between them. We all pause as we hear a car pull up outside. Oh – Edward's back. Thank heavens. The hoist for the garage door whirrs loudly into action, startling us all, and the door slowly lifts to reveal Edward and Jasper unloading a black flat bed truck. Edward stops when he sees us all standing in the garage.

"Garage band?" he asks sardonically as he wanders in, heading straight for me.

I grin. I am relieved to see him. He's wearing a rainproof jacket and navy pants…
Ha! The ones he bought in Newtons. He puts his arm around me.

"Hi," he says looking quizzically at me, ignoring both Rose and Emmett.

"Hi," I answer. "Nice pants."

"I have it on good authority that they're lightweight and breathable. Prevent chafing." His voice is soft and seductive, for my ears only, and when he gazes down at me his expression is hot.

I flush, and he smiles a huge, no-holds-barred, all-for-me smile.

"You're wet," I murmur.

"It was raining. What are you guys doing in the garage?" Finally he acknowledges that we are not alone.

"Bella came to fetch some wood," Emmett smirks. Somehow he manages to make that sentence sound smutty. "I tried to tempt her to take a ride. On the bike." Master of the double entendre.

Edward's face falls, and my heart stills.

"She said no. That you wouldn't like it," Emmett adds kindly – and innuendo-free.

Edward's green gaze swings back to me.

"Did she now?" he murmurs.

"Listen, I'm all for standing around discussing what Bella did next, but shall we go back inside?" Rose snaps. She stoops down, snatches up two logs, and turns on her heel, heading for the door. Oh shit. Rose is mad – but I know it's not at me. Emmett sighs, and without a word to us follows her out of the garage door. I gaze after them, but Edward distracts me.

"You can ride a motorcycle?" he asks, his voice laced with disbelief.

"Not very well. Jake taught me."

His eyes frost immediately.

"You made the right decision," he says, his voice much cooler. "The ground's very hard at the moment and the rain's made it very slippery."

"Where do you want the fishing gear?" Jasper calls from outside.

"Leave it, Jasper – Taylor will take care of it."

"What about the fish?" Jasper continues, his voice vaguely taunting.

"You caught a fish?" I ask, surprised.

"Not me. Hale did." And Edward pouts… prettily.

I burst out laughing.

"Mrs Bentley will deal with that," he calls back. Jasper grins and heads into the house.

"Am I amusing you, Mrs Cullen?"

"Very much so. You're wet… Let me run you a bath."

"As long as you join me." He leans down and kisses me.

-

I fill the large egg-shaped tub in the ensuite bathroom, and pour in some expensive bath oil, which starts to foam immediately. The aroma is heavenly… jasmine I think. I head back into the bedroom while the bath fills and start to hang The Dress.

"Did you have a good time?" Edward asks as he enters the room. He's just in t-shirt and navy pants, his feet bare. He closes the door behind him.

"Yes," I murmur, drinking him in. I have missed him. Ridiculous – it's only been what, a few hours?

He cocks his head to one side and gazes at me.

"What is it?"

"I was thinking how much I'd missed you."

"You sound smitten, Mrs Cullen," he whispers.

"I am, Mr Cullen."

He strolls towards me until he's standing in front of me.

"What did you buy?" he whispers, and I know it's to change the topic of conversation.

"A dress, some shoes, a necklace. I spent a great deal of your money." I glance up at him, guiltily.

He's amused.

"Good," he breathes, and his hand reaches up to tuck a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "And for the four billionth time, our money." Reaching down he releases my lip from my teeth and runs his index finger down the front of my t-shirt, down my sternum, between my breasts, down my stomach and over my belly to the hem.

"You won't be needing this in the bath," he murmurs, and gripping the hem of my t-shirt in both hands he slowly pulls it off me.

"Lift your arms," he orders.

I comply, not taking my eyes off his, and he drops my t-shirt on the floor.

"I thought we were just having a bath," I breathe as my pulse quickens.

"I want to make you good and dirty first. I've missed you too." He leans down and kisses me…

~o~

"Shit, the water!" I struggle to sit up, all post-orgasmic and dazed.

Edward doesn't release me.

"Edward, the bath!" I gaze down at him from my prone position across his chest.

He laughs.

"Relax – it's a wet room." He rolls over and kisses me quickly. "I'll switch off the faucet."

He climbs gracefully off the bed and strolls into the ensuite. My eyes greedily follow him all the way. Hmm… my husband, naked and soon to be wet. My inner goddess licks her lips salaciously and I bound out of bed.

We sit at opposite ends of the bath, which is very full – so full that whenever we move water laps over the side and splashes to the floor. It's very decadent. Even more decadent is Edward washing my feet, massaging the soles, pulling gently on my toes. He kisses each toe. He gently bites my little toe…

"Aaah!" I feel it… *there*, in my groin.

"Like that?" he breathes.

"Hmmm," I mumble incoherently.

He goes back to just the massage. Oh this feels good. I close my eyes.

"I saw Tanya in town," I murmur.

"Really? I think she has a place here," he says dismissively. He's not interested in the slightest.

"She was with Emmett."

Edward stops massaging. That got his attention. When I open my eyes his head is cocked to one side, like he doesn't understand.

"What do you mean, with Emmett?" he asks, perplexed rather than concerned.

I explain what I saw.

"Bella, they're just friends. I think Emmett is pretty stuck on Rose." He pauses, then adds more quietly, "In fact I know he's pretty stuck on her." And he gives me his I-have-no-idea-why look.

"Rose is gorgeous," I bristle, standing up for my friend.

He snorts.

"Still glad it was you that fell into my office." He kisses my big toe, releases my left foot and picks up my right, beginning the massage process again. His fingers are so strong and supple… I relax again. I do not want to fight about Rose. I close my eyes and let his fingers work their magic on my feet.

I gape at myself in the full-length mirror, not recognizing the vixen that stares back at me. Alice has played Barbie with me this evening, styling my hair and make-up. My hair is full and straight, my eyes ringed with kohl, my lips scarlet red. I look… hot. I am all legs, especially in the high-heeled Manolos and my frankly indecent short dress. I need Edward to approve, though I have a horrible feeling he won't like so much of my flesh exposed. In view of our entente cordiale, I decide I should ask him. I pick up my BlackBerry, as I doubt he'll hear me from upstairs.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Does My Butt Look Big In This?
Date: 29 August 2009: 18.53 MST
To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen
I need your sartorial advice.
Yours
Mrs C x

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Peachy
Date: 29 August 2009: 18.55 MST
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
I seriously doubt it.
But I will come and give your butt a thorough examination just to make sure.
Yours in anticipation

Mr C x

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings and Butt Inspectorate Inc

As I read his email, the bedroom door opens and Edward freezes on the threshold. His mouth pops open and his eyes widen.

Holy crap… this could go either way.

"Well?" I whisper

"Bella, you look… Wow."

"You like it?"

"Yes, I guess so." He's a little hoarse. Slowly he steps into the room and closes the door. He's in his black jeans and a white shirt, but with a black jacket… he looks divine. He stalks slowly towards me, but as soon as he reaches me, he puts his hands on my shoulders and turns me round to face the mirror, while he stands behind me. My gaze finds his in the glass, then he glances down, fascinated by my naked back. His finger glides down my spine and reaches the edge of my dress at the small of my back, where pale flesh meets silver cloth.

"This is very revealing," he murmurs.

His hand skims lower, over my backside and down to my naked thigh. He pauses, green eyes burning intently into brown. Then slowly he trails his fingers back up to the hem of my skirt.

Watching his long fingers move lightly, teasingly across my skin, feeling the tingles they leave in their wake… my mouth forms a perfect o.

"It's not far from here." He touches the hem, then moves his fingers higher. "To here," he whispers.

I gasp as his fingers stroke my sex, moving tantalizingly over my panties, feeling me, teasing me.

"And your point is?" I whisper.

"My point is… it's not far from here – " His fingers glide over my panties, then one is inside, against my soft dampened flesh. "– to here. And then to here." He slips a finger inside me.

I gasp, a soft mewling sound.

"This is mine," he murmurs in my ear. He closes his eyes as he moves his finger, slowly in and out of me. "I don't want anyone else to see this."

My breath stutters, my panting matching the rhythm of his finger. Watching him in the mirror, doing this… it's beyond erotic.

"So be a good girl, and don't bend down, and you should be fine."

"You approve?" I whisper.

"No, but I'm not going to stop you wearing it. You look stunning, Isabella." Abruptly he withdraws his finger, leaving me wanting more, and he moves round to face me. He places the tip of his invading finger on my lower lip. Instinctively I pucker my lips and kiss it and I'm rewarded with a wicked grin. He puts his finger in his mouth and his expression informs me that I taste good, real good.

I flush. Will it always shock me when he does that? He grasps my hand.

"Come." he orders softly. I want to retort that I was about to, but in light of what happened in the playroom yesterday, I decide against it.

~o~

We are in a plush, exclusive restaurant in town, waiting for dessert. It's been a lively evening so far, and Alice is determined it should continue, and that we must go clubbing. Right now she's sitting silently – for once – hanging on Jasper's every word as he and Edward talk. Alice is smitten too, with Jasper, and Jasper with her – it's so obvious.

Edward seems more at ease. He's been talking animatedly with Jasper – they obviously bonded over the fly-fishing. They're talking about psychology mainly. Ironically it's Edward who sounds the more knowledgeable. I snort softly as I half- listen to their conversation, sadly acknowledging that his expertise is the result of seeing so many shrinks.

You're the best therapy. His words, whispered long ago while we were making love, echo in my head. Am I? Oh Edward, I hope so.

I glance over at Rose. She looks beautiful, but then she always does. She and Emmett are less lively. Emmett seems nervous, his jokes slightly too loud, his laugh off. What's getting to him? Is it that woman? My heart sinks at the thought that he might hurt my best friend. I glance round at the entrance, half expecting to see Tanya calmly saunter her well-groomed ass across the restaurant to us. My mind is playing tricks – I suspect it's the amount of alcohol I've had. My head is beginning to ache.

Abruptly Emmett startles us all by standing and pulling his chair back so it scrapes across the tile floor. All eyes turn to him. He gazes down at Rose for one moment, then drops to one knee beside her.

Oh My God.

He reaches for her hand, and silence settles like a blanket over the entire restaurant, as everyone stops eating, stops talking, stops walking and stares.

"My beautiful Rose, I love you. Your grace, your beauty and your fiery spirit have no equal, and you have captured my heart. Spend your life with me. Marry me."

Holy Shit!

Chapter 105/18

The attention of the entire restaurant is trained on Rose and Emmett, waiting as one with baited breath. The anticipation is unbearable. Silence stretches like a taut rubber band. The atmosphere is oppressive, apprehensive and yet hopeful throughout the room.

Rose stares blankly at Emmett as he gazes up at her, his bluest of blue eyes wide with longing – fear even. *Holy crap, Rose! Put him out of his misery. Please.* Jeez – he could have asked her privately.

A single tear trickles down her cheek, though she remains expressionless. Fuck! Rose – crying? Then she smiles, a slow disbelieving I-think-I've-discovered-the-fabled-lost-city-of-El-Dorado smile.

"Yes," she whispers, a breathy, sweet acceptance – not Rose like at all. For one nanosecond there's a pause as the entire restaurant exhales a collective sigh of relief – and then the noise is deafening. Spontaneous applause, cheering, cat-calls, whooping – and suddenly I have tears rolling down my face, smudging my Barbie-meets-Joan-Jett make up.

Oblivious to the commotion around them, the two are locked in their own bubble. From his pocket Emmett produces a small box, opens it and presents it to Rose. A ring… and from what I can see, an exquisite ring, but I need a closer look. Oh no – is that what he bought with Tanya? Why Tanya? Oh, I'm so glad I didn't tell Rose.

Rose looks from the ring to Emmett, then throws her arms around his neck. They kiss, remarkably chastely for them, and the crowd goes wild. Emmett stands and acknowledges the approbation with a surprisingly graceful bow, then, wearing a huge self-satisfied, joyous grin, sits back down. I can't take my eyes off them. Taking the ring out of its box Emmett gently slides it onto Rose's finger, and they kiss once more.

Edward squeezes my hand – I didn't realize I'd been gripping his so tightly. I release him, a little embarrassed, and he shakes his hand, mouthing "Ow".

"Sorry. Did you know about this?" I whisper.

Edward smiles, and I know that he did. He summons the waiter.

"Two bottles of the Cristal please. The 2002 if you have it," he murmurs.

I smirk at him.

"What?" he asks.

"Because the 2002 is so much better than the 2003," I tease.

He laughs.

"To the discerning palate, Isabella," he says, grinning.

"You have a very discerning palate, Mr Cullen, and singular interests," I smile.

He cocks his head to one side.

"That I do, Mrs Cullen." He leans in close. "You taste better," he whispers, and he kisses a certain spot beside my ear, sending little shivers down my spine. I flush scarlet, fondly remembering his demonstration of the quite literal shortcomings of my dress.

Alice is the first up to hug Rose and Emmett, and after her we all take turns congratulating the happy couple.

I clutch Rose in a fierce hug.

"See? He was just worried about his proposal," I whisper.

"Oh Bella," she giggle-sobs.

"Rose, I am so happy for you. Congratulations."

Edward is behind me. He shakes Emmett's hand, then – surprising both Emmett and me – pulls him into a hug. I can only just catch what he says.

"Way to go, Memet," he murmurs. Emmett says nothing – for once stunned into silence – then cautiously returns his brother's hug.

Memet?

"Thanks, Edward," Emmett chokes out.

Edward gives Rose a brief, if awkward, almost arm's-length hug. I know that Edward's attitude to Rose is tolerant at best, and ambivalent most of the time, so… this is progress. Releasing her he says so quietly only she and I can hear,

"I hope you are as happy in your marriage as I am in mine."

"Thank you, Edward. I hope so too," she says graciously.

The waiter has returned with the champagne, which he proceeds to open with an understated flourish.

Edward holds his champagne flute aloft.

"To Rose and my brother Emmett – congratulations."

We all sip… well, I glug. Hmmm – Cristal tastes so good… and I'm reminded of the first time I drank it, when we ate at Edward's club… and later, our eventful elevator journey to the first floor.

Edward frowns at me.

"What are you thinking about?" he whispers.

"The first time I drank this champagne."

He frowns.

"We were at your club," I prompt.

He grins.

"Oh yes. I remember." He winks at me.

"Emmett, have you set a date?" Alice pipes up. Jasper beams at her.

Emmett gives his sister an exasperated stare.

"I've only just asked Rose, so we'll come back to you on that. K?"

"Oh, make it a Christmas wedding. That would be so romantic – and you'd have no trouble remembering your anniversary." Alice claps her hands.

"I'll take that under advisement," Emmett smirks at her.

"After the champagne, please can we go clubbing?" Alice turns and gives Edward her biggest, brown-eyed look.

"I think we should ask Emmett and Rose what they'd like to do."

As one we turn expectantly to them. Emmett shrugs, and Rose turns puce. Her carnal intent towards her fiancé is so clear I nearly spit four-hundred dollar champagne all over the table.

~o~

Zax is the most exclusive nightclub in Aspen – or so says Alice. Edward strolls, his arm wrapped around my waist, to the front of the short line and is immediately granted access. I wonder briefly if he owns the place. I glance at my watch – eleven thirty in the evening, and I'm feeling fuzzy. The two glasses of champagne and several glasses of Pouilly-Fumé during our meal are starting to have an effect… I'm grateful Edward has his arm around me.

"Mr Cullen, welcome back," says a very attractive, leggy blond in black satin hot pants, matching sleeveless shirt, and a little red bowtie. She smiles broadly, revealing perfect all-American teeth between scarlet lips that match her bowtie. "Max will take your coat."

A young man dressed entirely in black, fortunately not satin, smiles as he offers to take my coat. His dark eyes are warm and inviting. I am the only one wearing a coat – Edward insisted I take Alice's trench coat to cover my behind – so Max only has to deal with me.

"Nice coat," he says, gazing at me intently.

Beside me Edward bristles and fixes Max with a back-off-now glare. He flushes and quickly hands Edward my coat check ticket.

"Let me show you to your table." Miss Satin Hot Pants flutters her eyelashes at my husband, flicks her long blond hair behind her and sashays through the entryway. I tighten my grip around Edward, and he gazes down at me questioningly for a moment, then smirks at me, as we follow Miss Impossibly Long Legs into the bar.

The lighting is muted. The walls are black, I think, the furnishings all deep, deep red. There are booths flanking two sides of the walls and a large U-shaped bar in the middle. It's busy, given that we're here off-season, but not too crowded, with the well-heeled of Aspen out for a good time on a Saturday night. The dress code is relaxed, and for the first time I feel a little over… um, under-dressed. I'm not sure which. The floor and walls vibrate with the music pulsing from the dance floor behind the bar. Lights are whirling, strobing and flashing on and off… in my heady state I idly think it's an epileptic's nightmare.

Hot Pants leads us to a corner booth that's been roped off. It's near the bar, with access to the dance floor. Clearly the best spot in the place.

"There'll be someone along to take your order shortly." She gives us all her megawatt smile, and with a final flutter of eyelashes at my husband sashays back from where she came. Alice is already jigging from foot to foot, itching to get on to the dance floor. Jasper takes pity on her.

"Champagne?" Edward asks as they head off hand in hand towards the throbbing music. Jasper gives him a thumbs-up and Alice nods enthusiastically. Jeez, Alice does everything enthusiastically.

Rose and Emmett sit back on the soft velvet seating, hand in hand. They look so happy, their features soft and radiant in the glow from the tea-lights flickering in crystal holders on the low table. Edward gestures for me to sit, and I scoot in beside Rose. He takes a seat beside me and anxiously scans the room.

"Show me your ring," I ask Rose, raising my voice over the music. I will be hoarse by the time we leave. Rose beams at me. Her ring is exquisite – a single solitaire in a fine elaborate claw with tiny diamonds on either side. It has a retro Victorian feel to it.

"It's beautiful," I breathe.

She nods in delight and reaching over squeezes Emmett's thigh. He leans down and kisses her.

"Get a room," I call out.

Emmett grins.

A young woman with short dark hair and a wicked smile, wearing regulation black satin hot pants, comes to take our order.

"What do you want to drink?" Edward asks us.

"You're not picking up the tab for this too," Emmett grumbles.

"Em, don't start that shit," Edward says mildly.

Despite the objections of Rose, Emmett and Jasper, Edward has, of course, paid for the meal we just consumed. He simply waved them aside and would not hear of anyone else paying. I gaze at him lovingly. My Fifty Shades… always in control.

Emmett opens his mouth to say something but, wisely perhaps, closes it again.

"I'll have a beer," he says.

"Rose?" Edward asks.

"More champagne please. The Cristal is delicious. But I'm sure Jasper would prefer a beer." She smiles sweetly – *yes, sweetly* – at Edward. She is incandescent with happiness. I can feel it radiating off her, and it's a pleasure to bask in her joy.

"Bella?"

"Champagne, please."

"Bottle of Cristal, three bottles of Corona, and a bottle of iced mineral water, six glasses," he says in his usual authoritative, no-nonsense manner. It's kinda hot.

"Thank you, sir. Coming right up." Miss Hot Pants Number two gives him a gracious smile but he's spared the fluttering of eyelashes, though her cheeks redden slightly.

"What?" he asks me.

"She didn't flutter her eyelashes at you." I smirk.

He blinks at me.

"Oh. Was she supposed to?" he asks, and I can tell he's amused.

"Women usually do," I mutter tartly.

He grins.

"Mrs Cullen, are you jealous?"

"Not in the slightest," I pout at him. And I realize in that moment that I am beginning to tolerate women ogling my husband. Almost. Edward clasps my hand and kisses my knuckles.

"You have nothing to be jealous of, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs close to my ear, his breath tickling me.

"I know."

"Good."

The waitress returns, and moments later I'm sipping another glass of champagne.

"Here." Edward hands me a glass of water. "Drink this."

I blink at him and I can see, though not hear, his sigh.

"Three large glasses of white wine at dinner and two of champagne, after a strawberry daiquiri and two glasses of Frascati at lunchtime. Drink. Now, Bella."

How does he know about the cocktails this afternoon? I scowl at him. But actually he does have a point. Taking the glass of water I down it in a most unladylike manner to register my protest at being told what to do… again. I wipe my hand across the back of my mouth.

"Good girl," he says, smirking. "You've vomited on me once already. I don't wish to experience that again in a hurry."

"I don't know what you're complaining about. You got to sleep with me."

He smiles and his eyes soften.

"Yes. I did."

Jasper and Alice are back.

"Jasper's had enough, for now. Come on girls – let's hit the floor. Strike a pose, throw some shapes, work off the calories from the chocolate mousse."

Hmmm. Alice makes a good case. Rose obviously agrees, and she stands immediately.

"Coming?" she asks Emmett.

"Let me watch you," he says. And I have to look away quickly, blushing at the look he gives her. She grins as I stand.

"I'm going to burn some calories," I say, and leaning down I whisper in Edward's ear, "You can watch me."

Edward scowls at me.

"Don't bend over," he growls.

"Okay." I stand abruptly. Whoa… head rush. I clutch Edward's shoulder, as the room shifts slightly.

"Perhaps you should have some more water," Edward murmurs, and I hear the warning in his voice.

"I'm fine. These seats are low and my heels are high," I mutter.

Reaching out Rose takes my hand, and I take a deep breath as I follow her and Alice, perfectly poised, onto the dance floor.

The music is pulsing a techno beat with a thumping bass line. The dance floor isn't crowded, which means we have some space, but fortunately we're not the only ones there. The mix is eclectic – young and old alike dancing the night away. I have never been a good dancer. In fact it's only since I've been with Edward that I dance at all. Rose hugs me.

"I'm so happy," she shouts over the music, and she starts to dance. Alice is doing what Alice does, grinning at the pair of us, throwing herself around… jeez, for someone so small she's taking up a lot of room on the dance floor. I glance back towards the table. Our men are watching us. I start to move. It's a pulsing rhythm. I close my eyes and surrender to it…

Yes, I can see her
'cause every girl in here wanna be her
Oh! She's a Diva…

I open my eyes to find the dance floor filling up. Rose, Alice and I are forced closer together. I am actually enjoying myself. I begin to move a little more… a little more bravely… Rose gives me two thumbs up. I find myself beaming back at her.

I feel the same, and I wanna meet her
They say: "She low down…"
It's just a rumor I don't believe 'em
They say: "She needs to slow down…"
The baddest thing around town

I close my eyes. Why did I spend the first twenty years of my life not doing this? I chose reading over dancing. Jane Austen didn't have great music to move to… and Thomas Hardy… jeez, he'd have felt guilty as sin that he wasn't dancing with his first wife… I giggle at the thought.

She's nothing like a girl you've ever seen before
Nothing you can compare to your neighborhood whore
I'm trying to find the words to describe this girl without being disrespectful

It's Edward. Edward has given me this confidence in my body and how I can move it…

The way, that booty movin' – I can't take no more
Have to stop what I'm doin', so I can pull up her close
I'm trying to find the words to describe this girl without being disrespectful

Suddenly I feel two hands on my hips. I grin. Edward has joined me. I wiggle and his hands move to my behind and back to my hips.

Damn Girl. Damn, you's a sexy bitch, sexy bitch
Damn, you's a sexy bitch

I open my eyes. And Alice is gaping at me in horror. Shit… Am I that bad? I reach down to hold Edward's hands. They're hairy. FUCK! They're not his. I whirl round, and towering over me is a blond giant with more teeth than is natural and a leering smile to showcase them looming over me.

"Get your hands off me!" I scream over the pounding music, apoplectic with rage.

"Come on sugar, it's just some fun," he smiles, holding his ape-like hands up, his blue eyes gleaming under the ultra violet lights.

Damn Girl. Damn, you's a sexy bitch, sexy bitch
Damn, you's a sexy bitch

Before I know what I'm doing I punch him, hard, on the corner of his mouth. Fuck… my hand. It throbs. *Ow…*

Damn Girl. Damn, you's a sexy bitch, sexy bitch
Damn, you's a sexy bitch

"Get away from me!" I shout.

He gazes down at me, shielding the corner of his mouth. I thrust my uninjured hand in front of his face, spreading my fingers to show him my rings.

"I'm married, you asshole!"

He shrugs rather arrogantly and gives me a half-hearted apologetic smile.

Damn Girl. Damn, you's a sexy bitch, sexy bitch
Damn, you's a sexy bitch

I glance round frantically. Alice is at my right, glaring at Blond Giant. Rose is lost in the moment doing her thing. Edward is not at the table… *oh I hope he's gone to the rest room.* I step back – oh shit – into a front I know well. Edward puts him arm around my waist and moves me to his side.

"Keep your fucking hands off my wife," he says. He's not shouting but somehow he can be heard over the music.

Holy shit!

"She can take care of herself," Blond Giant mutters. His hand moves from his mouth where I have split his lip… and Edward hits him. It's like I'm watching it in slow motion – a perfectly timed punch to the chin that moves at such speed, but with so little wasted energy, Blond Giant doesn't see it coming. He crumples to the floor like the bag of manure he is.

Fuck.

"Edward, no!" I gasp in panic, standing in front of him to hold him back. Shit, he'll kill him. "I already hit him," I shout over the music. Edward doesn't look at me – he's glaring at my assailant with a malevolence I've not seen before flaring in his eyes. Well, maybe once before… outside SIP after James Smith's pass at me.

The other dancers move outwards like a ripple in a pond, clearing space around us, keeping a safe distance. Blond Giant scrambles to his feet as Emmett joins us. Oh no! Rose is with me, gaping at all of us. Emmett grasps Edward's arm, as Jasper appears too.

"Take it easy, okay? Didn't mean any harm." Blond Giant holds his hands up in defeat, beating a hasty retreat. Edward's eyes follow him off the dance floor. He does not look at me.

The song changes. Emmett looks down at me, then across at Edward, and takes his hand off Edward's arm. Jasper pulls Alice into his arms. I put my arms around Edward's neck until he finally gazes down at me, his eyes still blazing – primal and feral, a glimpse of a brawling adolescent. Holy shit. He gazes at me, scrutinizing my face. *What is he thinking?*

"Are you okay?" he says finally.

"Yes." I flex my fingers unconsciously as I bring my hands down to his chest. My hand is throbbing… I have never punched anyone before. What possessed me? Touching me wasn't the worst crime against humanity. Was it?

Yet deep down I know why I hit him. It's because I instinctively knew how Edward would react, seeing some stranger pawing me. I knew he'd lose his precious self-control. And the thought that some stupid nobody could derail my Fifty… my love… Well, it makes me mad. Real mad.

"Do you want to sit down?" Edward asks, warily.

Oh, come back to me, please…

"No. Dance with me."

You will always be my baby
I'm always thinking of you baby, yeah
Touch me in the morning
And last thing at night

"Dance with me." He's still mad. "Dance. Edward, please." I take his hands. Edward glares after the guy, but I start to move against him, rubbing myself against him, weaving myself around him.

Keep my body warm baby
You know it feels right
Take a little higher
I'm thinking it too (too)
Tell me what you're feeling
I feel it with you

The throng of dancers has circled us again, although there is now a 2ft exclusion zone around us.

"You hit him?" Edward asks. He stands stock-still as I take his fisted hands.

"Of course I did. I thought it was you, but his hands were hairier. Please dance with me."

We can only understand what we are shown
How was I supposed to know our love would grow

As Edward gazes at me the fire in his eyes slowly changes, evolves into something else… something darker, something hotter. Suddenly he grabs my wrists and pulls me flush against him, pinning my hands behind my back.

"You wanna dance? Let's dance," he growls close to my ear… and as he rolls his hips around into me, I can do nothing but follow, his hands holding mine against my backside.

Come a little closer
Things sure are looking up
Heal me with your loving
I need you so much, I need you so much, I need you so much
We can only understand what we are shown

Edward can move. Boy can he move. He keeps me close, not letting me go, but his hands gradually relax on mine, freeing me. My hands creep round, up his arms, feeling his bunched muscles through his jacket, up to his shoulders. He presses me against him, and I follow his moves, as he slowly, sensually dances with me, in time to the pulsing beat of the club music.

How was I supposed to know our love would grow
We can only understand what we are shown
You touch my mind in special place
My heart races with you

The moment he grabs my hand and spins me first one way, then the other, I know he's back with me. I grin. He grins.

I'll take your love and I'll take my chances
I'll take them with you

We dance together and it's so liberating, so much fun. His anger forgotten, or suppressed, he throws me around with consummate skill in our small space on the dance floor, never letting me go. He makes me graceful, that's his skill. He makes me sexy, because that's what he is. He makes me feel loved – really loved. In spite of his fifty shades he has a wealth of love to give. Granted, it's clouded with issues of over-protectiveness and control… but deep down, how could I ever doubt that this beautiful man loves me?

We can only understand what we are shown
How was I supposed to know our love would grow
You touch my mind in special places
My heart races with you

I am breathless, and the song morphs to another.

"Can we sit?" I gasp.

"Sure," he says, and taking my hand leads me off the dance floor.

"You've made me rather hot and sweaty," I whisper as we return to the table.

He pulls me into his arms.

"I like you hot and sweaty. Though I prefer to make you hot and sweaty in private," he purrs. I flush, and a lascivious smile tugs at his lips.

I sit. It's as if the incident on the dance floor never happened. I'm vaguely surprised we haven't been thrown out. I glance around the bar… no one is looking at us, and I can't see Blond Giant. Maybe he left – or maybe he's been thrown out. Rose and Emmett are being indecent on the dance floor, Jasper and Alice less so. I take another sip of champagne.

"Here." Edward puts another glass of water before me and regards me intently, his expression saying, drink it. Drink it now. I do as I'm told. Besides, I'm thirsty. Reaching over he lifts a bottle of Corona from the ice bucket on the table and takes a long drink.

"What if there had been press here?" I ask.

Edward knows immediately that I'm referring to him knocking Blonde Giant on his ass.

"I have expensive lawyers," he says coolly. I frown at him. All at once he's arrogance personified.

"But you're not above the law, Edward. I did have the situation under control," I reply, as softly as the music allows.

His eyes frost.

"No one touches what's mine," he says with chilling finality, gazing at me as if I'm missing the obvious.

I gape at him, then take another sip of my champagne. All of a sudden I feel overwhelmed. The music is loud, pounding… my head is aching… and I feel woozy.

He grasps my hand.

"Come, let's go. I want to get you home," he says. Rose and Emmett join us.

"You going?" Rose asks, and her voice is hopeful.

"Yes," Edward says.

"Good, we'll come with you."

.

As we wait at the coat check for Edward to retrieve my trench-coat, Rose quizzes me.

"What happened with that guy on the dance floor?"

"He was feeling me up."

"I opened my eyes and you'd hit him."

I shrug.

"Well. I knew Edward would go thermo-nuclear, and that could potentially ruin your evening." I haven't really processed how I feel about Edward's behaviour. I was worried that it would be worse.

"Our evening," she clarifies. "He is rather hot-headed isn't he?" Rose adds dryly, staring at Edward as he collects my coat.

I snort and smile.

"You could say that."

"I think you handle him well."

"Handle?" I frown. Do I *handle* Edward?

"Here," Edward says, holding my coat open for me so that I can put it on.

.

The minivan is outside and Taylor is sliding open the door as we come out. There are no paps – what a relief.

"Good evening, sir," says Taylor.

"Alice and Jasper are still here. Will you drop us off, then come back and get them?" Edward asks.

"Of course," Taylor says, expressionless, though he frowns when he looks at me. Holy crap. I stare down at my feet, and for some reason I don't want Taylor to know about the fracas on the dance floor.

Edward steps aside to allow Rose and Emmett into the back.

"After you, Mrs Cullen," he says when it's my turn to clamber in. Emmett and Rose are now being indecent in the back. I sit in the first available seat, leaving a row of seats between us to afford them some privacy. Edward slides in beside me, putting his arm around me, and I snuggle up against him. He kisses my hair, and Taylor sets off home.

~o~

"Wake up, Bella." Edward is shaking me gently. We're back at the house. Reluctantly I open my eyes and stagger down from the minivan. Rose and Emmett have disappeared, and Taylor is standing patiently beside the vehicle.

"Do I need to carry you?" Edward asks.

I shake my head.

"I'll fetch Miss Cullen and Mr Hale," Taylor says.

Edward nods, then leads me to the front door. My feet are throbbing and I stumble after him. At the front door he bends down, grasps my ankle, and gently prises off first one shoe, then the other. Oh… the relief. He stands and gazes down at me, holding my Manolos.

"Better?" he asks, amused.

I nod.

"I had visions of these round my ears," he murmurs staring down wistfully at my shoes. He shakes his head, and taking my hand once more leads me through the darkened house, up the stairs to our bedroom.

"You're shattered aren't you?" he asks softly, staring down at me.

I nod. He starts to unbuckle the belt on my trench coat.

"I'll do it," I mutter, making a half-hearted attempt to brush him off.

"Let me," he says quietly.

I sigh. I had no idea I was this tired.

"It's the altitude. You're not used to it. And the drinking," he smirks. He pulls the coat off me and throws it on one of the bedroom chairs. Taking my hand he leads me into the bathroom. What? Why are we going in here?

"Sit," he says.

I sit on the chair. I can barely keep my eyes open. I hear him messing around with bottles on the vanity unit. What is he doing? I am too tired to open my eyes to find out. A moment later he tips my head back. Now I open my eyes, in surprise.

"Eyes closed," Edward says. Holy crap, he's holding a cotton ball! Gently he wipes it over my right eye. I sit stunned and immobilized as he methodically removes my make-up.

"Ah. There's the woman I married," he says after a few wipes.

"You don't like make-up?" I mumble.

"I like it well enough, but I prefer what's beneath it." He kisses my forehead.

"Here. Take these."

He puts some Advil into my palm and hands me a glass of water. I blink up at him.

"Take them," he orders.

I roll my eyes, but do as I'm told.

"Good. Do you need a private moment?" he asks sardonically.

I snort.

"So coy, Mr Cullen. Yes, I need to pee."

He laughs.

"You expect me to leave?"

I giggle.

"You want to stay?"

He cocks his head to one side, his expression amused.

"You are one kinky son-of-a-bitch. Out." I stand and wave him out of the bathroom.

.

When I emerge from the bathroom he's changed into his pj bottoms. Hmm… Edward in pjs. I gaze mesmerised at his abdomen… his muscles… his happy trail. It's distracting. He strides over to me.

"Enjoying the view?" he asks wryly.

"Always," I reply.

"I think you are slightly drunk, Mrs Cullen."

"I think for once I agree with you, Mr Cullen."

"Let me help you out of what little there is of this dress. It really should come with a health warning." He turns me round and undoes the single button at the neck.

"You were so mad," I murmur.

"Yes. I was."

"At me?"

"No. Not at you." He kisses my shoulder. "For once."

I smile. Not mad at me. This is progress.

"Makes a nice change."

"Yes. It does." He kisses my other shoulder, then pulls my dress down over my backside and onto the floor. He removes my panties at the same time, leaving me naked. Reaching up he takes my hand.

'Step," he commands, and I step out of the dress, holding his hand for balance.

He stands, and my dress and panties join Alice's trench coat on the chair.

"Arms up," he says softly. He slips his t-shirt over me and pulls it down, covering me up. I am ready for bed.

He pulls me into his arms and kisses me, my minty breath mingling with his.

"As much as I'd love to bury myself in you, Mrs Cullen – you've had too much to drink, you're at nearly 8000 feet, and you didn't sleep well yesterday. Come. Get into bed." He pulls back the duvet and I climb in. He covers me up, bends down and kisses my forehead once more.

"Close your eyes," he murmurs. "When I come back to bed I'll expect you to be asleep." It's a threat, a command… it's Edward.

"Don't go," I plead.

"I have some calls to make, Bella."

"It's Saturday. It's late. Please."

He runs his hands through his hair.

"Bella, if I come to bed with you now, you won't get any rest. Sleep." He's adamant. I close my eyes. Images of the day flash through my mind… Edward hauling me over his shoulder in the plane, his anxiety as to whether or not I'd like the house, making love this afternoon, the bath, his reaction to my dress. Decking Blond Giant. My hand throbs at the memory. And then Edward putting me to bed. Who would have thought? I grin, widely… the word *progress* running round my brain as I drift

Chapter 106/19

I am too warm. Edward warm. His head is on my shoulder, and he is breathing softly on my neck while he sleeps, his legs threaded through mine, his arm around my waist. I linger on the edge of consciousness, aware that if I wake fully I'll wake him too, and he doesn't sleep enough. Hazily my mind wanders through the events of yesterday evening. I drank too much – boy did I drink too much. I'm amazed Edward let me. I smile as I remember him putting me to bed. That was sweet – real sweet, and unexpected. I conduct a quick mental inventory of how I'm feeling. Stomach? Fine. Head? Surprisingly, fine, but Fuzzy. There's a dull ache in my hand… is that what woke me? I stretch my fingers, and wince – *Ow*. Edward wakes.

"What's wrong?" Sleepy green eyes search mine.

"Nothing," I murmur. "Good morning." Reaching up I run the fingers of my uninjured hand through his hair.

"Mrs Cullen, you look lovely this morning," he says softly, kissing my cheek.

I feel a warm glow within.

"Thank you for taking care of me last night."

"I like taking care of you," he says, smiling – but his eyes widen briefly, as delirious triumph flares in their green depths. It's like he's won the World Series or the Super Bowl. *Oh, my Fifty*.

"You make me feel cherished," I murmur, because it's true.

He swallows, and suddenly he looks vulnerable.

"That's because you are," he whispers. I hear the love in his voice, and my heart clenches. He reaches up to clasp my aching hand.

"Ah!" I yelp. Edward releases me immediately, alarmed.

"The punch?" he asks after a moment. His eyes frost as he scrutinizes mine, and his voice is laced with sudden anger. I nod uncertainly.

"That fucker!" he snarls.

Holy crap. I thought we'd dealt with this last night.

"I can't bear that he touched you."

"He didn't hurt me, he was just inappropriate. Edward, I'm okay. My hand's a little stiff, that's all." I stroke his face with the injured hand, my fingers caressing his side-burn. Gently I tug the little hairs. It works. He calms, and the pain in my hand eases as I use it.

"Why didn't you tell me last night?" he mutters, not quite petulantly.

"Um… I didn't really feel it last night. It's okay now."

His eyes soften and his mouth twists.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better than I deserve."

"That's quite a right hook you have there, Mrs Cullen." He gently kisses my bruised knuckles.

"You'd do well to remember that, Mr Cullen."

He raises his brows in amused surprise.

"Oh really?" He rolls suddenly so that he's fully on top of me, pressing me into the mattress, holding my wrists above my head. He gazes down at me.

"I'd fight you any day, Mrs Cullen," he purrs. "In fact, subduing you in bed is a fantasy of mine." He kisses my throat.

What?

"I thought you subdued me all the time," I gasp, as he nibbles my earlobe.

"Hmm… but I'd like some resistance," he murmurs, his nose skirting my jaw.

Resistance? I still.

He stops, releasing my hands, and leans up on his elbows, gazing anxiously down at me.

"You want me to fight you? Here?" I whisper, trying to contain my surprise. Okay – my shock.

He nods. His eyes are hooded but wary as he gauges my reaction.

"Now?"

He shrugs, and I see the idea flit through his mind. He gives me his shy smile and nods again, slowly.

Oh my… He's tensed, lying on top of me, his growing erection digging tantalizingly into my soft, willing flesh, distracting me. What's this about? Brawling? Fantasy? Will he hurt me? My inner goddess shakes her head – *Never.* She's got her karate suit on and she's limbering up. Laurent would be pleased.

"Is this what you meant about coming to bed angry?" I ask.

He nods once more, his eyes still wary.

Oh. My Fifty wants to rumble.

"Don't bite your lip," he warns.

Compliantly I release my lip.

"I think you have me at a disadvantage, Mr Cullen," I murmur, gazing up at him through my lashes, and squirming provocatively beneath him. This could be fun.

"Disadvantage?"

"Surely you've already got me where you want me?"

He smirks down at me, pressing his groin into mine once more.

"Good point, well made, Mrs Cullen," he whispers, and quickly kisses my lips. Abruptly he shifts, taking me with him, rolling over so I end up astride him. I grab his hands, pinning them to the side of his head, ignoring the ache of protest from my punching hand. My hair falls in a chestnut veil around us. I move my head so that the strands tickle his face. He jerks his face away, but doesn't try to stop me.

"So, you want to play rough?" I ask, skimming my crotch over his.

His mouth opens and he inhales sharply.

"Yes," he hisses.

I release him.

"Wait," I murmur, and reach over for the glass of water beside the bed. Edward must have left it here. It's cool and sparkling – too cool to have been sitting here for long. Briefly I wonder when he came to bed. As I take a long draught Edward reaches forward and runs his hands up from my knees. His fingers trail in small circles over my thighs, leaving tingling skin in their wake as they travel up to my naked behind. He cups and squeezes me. Hmmm. Taking a leaf from his impressive repertoire I lean forward and kiss him, pouring clear cool water into his mouth. He drinks.

"Very tasty, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs, and grins up at me, boyish and playful.

Placing the glass back on the bedside table I remove his hands from my backside and pin them by his head once more.

"So I'm supposed to be unwilling?" I smirk.

"Yes."

"I'm not much of an actress."

He grins.

"Try," he mouths. I lean down and kiss him chastely.

"Okay, I'll play," I whisper, trailing my teeth along his jaw, feeling his prickly stubble beneath my teeth and my tongue. Edward makes a low, sexy sound in his throat and moves, tossing me onto the bed beside him. I cry out in surprise, then he's on top of me, and I start to struggle as he makes a grab for my hands. Roughly I place my hands on his chest, pushing with all my might, trying to shift him, while he endeavors to prise my legs apart with his knee. I keep on pushing at his chest – jeez he's heavy – but he doesn't flinch, doesn't freeze as he once might have… he's enjoying this! He attempts to grab my wrists, and finally captures one, despite my valiant attempts to twist it free. It's my sore hand, so I surrender it to him – but grab his hair with my other hand and pull, hard.

"Ah!" he rasps, yanking his head free and gazing down at me, his eyes wild with carnal excitement.

"Savage," he whispers. I can hear his awe and delight. In response to this one whispered word my libido explodes, and I stop acting. Again I struggle in vain to wrest my hand out of his hold, at the same time trying to hook my ankles together, and attempting to buck him off me. He's too heavy. Gah – it's frustrating… and hot.

With a groan Edward captures my other hand. He holds both my wrists in his left hand, and his right travels leisurely – insolently, almost – down my body, fondling and feeling as it goes, tweaking my nipple on the way. I yelp in response, pleasure spiking short, sharp

and hot from my nipple to my groin. I make another fruitless attempt to buck him off, but he's just too *on-me!*

When he tries to kiss me I jerk my head to the side so he can't. Promptly his insolent hand moves from the hem of my t-shirt up to my chin, holding me in place as he runs his teeth along my jaw, mirroring what I did to him earlier.

"Oh baby, fight me," he murmurs.

I twist and writhe, trying to free myself from his merciless hold, but it's hopeless. He's much stronger than me. He's gently biting at my lower lip as his tongue tries to invade my mouth. And I realize I don't want to resist him. I want him – I want him now. I stop fighting and fervently return his kiss. I don't care that I haven't brushed my teeth. I don't care that we're supposed to be playing some game. Desire hot and hard surges through my bloodstream, and I am lost, lost to him. Unhooking my ankles I wrap my legs around his hips and use my heels to push his pjs down over his behind.

"Bella," he breathes, and he kisses me everywhere. And we're no longer wrestling, but we're quick and urgent, all hands and tongues and touch and taste.

"Skin," he murmurs hoarsely, his breathing labored. He drags me up and pulls off my t-shirt in one swift move.

"You," I whisper, while I'm upright, because it's all I can think of to say. I seize his pjs and yank them down, freeing his erection. I grab and squeeze him – jeez he's so hard. I hear the air whistle through his teeth as he inhales sharply, and I revel in his response.

"Fuck," he murmurs. He leans back, lifting my thighs, tipping me down onto the bed, as I pull and squeeze him tightly, running my hand up and down him. Feeling a bead of moisture on his tip I swirl it round with my thumb. As he lowers me to the mattress I slip my thumb in my mouth to taste him, while his hands travel up my body, caressing my hips, my stomach, my breasts.

"Taste good?" he breathes, as he hovers over me, eyes blazing.

"Yes. Here." I push my thumb into his mouth. He sucks and bites the pad, his eyes burning into mine. I groan, grasp his head and pull him down to me so I can kiss him, as I wrap my legs around him and push his pjs off his legs with my feet. Once he's free of them, I wrap my legs around his waist, wanting him. His lips trail from across my jaw to my chin, nipping softly.

"You're so beautiful," he murmurs, as he dips his head lower, to the base of my throat.

"Such beautiful skin," he breathes, as his lips glide on, down to my breasts.

What? I am panting, confused – wanting, now waiting. I thought this was going to be quick.

"Edward," I breathe. I hear the plea in my voice, and reach down, fisting my hands in his hair.

"Hush," he breathes, and circles my nipple with his tongue, before pulling it into his mouth and tugging hard.

"Ah!" I moan and squirm, tilting my pelvis up to tempt him. He grins against my skin and turns his attention to my other breast.

"Impatient, Mrs Cullen?" he whispers. Then sucks hard on my nipple.

I tug his hair. He groans and peers up.

"I'll restrain you," he warns.

"Take me," I beg.

"All in good time," he murmurs against my skin.

His hand travels down at an infuriatingly slow speed to my hip as he worships my nipple with his mouth. I moan loudly, my breath short and shallow, and try once more to entice him into me, rocking against him. I can feel him, thick and heavy and close… But he's taking his own sweet leisurely time with me.

Fuck this. I struggle and twist, determined to buck him off me again.

"What the – "

Grabbing my hands Edward pins them down on the bed, my arms spread wide, and rests his full bodyweight on me, completely subduing me. I am breathless, wild.

"You wanted resistance," I pant.

He rears up over me and gazes down, his hands still locked around my wrists. I place my heels under his behind and push… He doesn't move. Gah!

"You don't want to play nice?" he asks astonished, his eyes alight with excitement.

"I just want you to make love to me, Edward," I whisper. Could he be any more obtuse? First we're fighting and wrestling, then he's all tender and sweet. It's confusing – I'm in bed with Mr Mercurial.

"Please," I breathe, pressing my heels against his backside once more. Burning green eyes search mine. Oh, what is he thinking? He looks momentarily bewildered and confused. He releases my hands and kneels up, pulling me into his lap.

"Okay Mrs Cullen, we'll do this your way," he murmurs. Reaching around my waist he lifts and slowly lowers me on to him so I am astride.

I moan loudly. This is it. This is what I want. This is what I need. I wrap my arms around his neck and twist my fingers in his hair, glorying in the feeling of him inside me. I start to move. Taking control, taking him at my pace, at my speed. He moans, and his lips find mine.

.

I trail my fingers through the hair on Edward's chest. He lies on his back, still and quiet beside me as we both catch our breath. His hand thrums rhythmically down my back.

"You're quiet," I whisper, and kiss his shoulder.

He turns and looks down at me, his expression giving nothing away.

"That was fun," I add, blinking up at him. Shit, is something wrong?

"You confound me, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs.

"Confound you?"

He shifts so that we're face to face.

"Yes. You. Calling the shots. It's… different."

"Good different? Or bad different?" I reach up and trail a finger over his lips. His brow furrows, as if he doesn't quite understand the question. Absentmindedly he purses his lip to kiss my finger.

"Good different," he says, but he doesn't sound convinced.

"You've never indulged this little fantasy before?" I flush as I say it. Do I really want to know any more about my husband's colorful… um, kaleidoscopic, sex life before me? My subconscious eyes me warily over her tortoiseshell half-moon specs. *Do you really want to go there?*

"No, Isabella," he murmurs. "You can touch me." It's a simple explanation that speaks volumes. Oh… of course, the fifteen couldn't.

"Mrs Robinson could touch you." I murmur the words before my brain registers that they've left my mouth. *Shit.*

He stills. His eyes widen with his oh-no-where's-she-going-with-this expression.

"That was different," he whispers.

Suddenly I want to know.

"Good different or bad different?"

He gazes at me. Doubt and possibly pain flit across his face, and fleetingly he looks like a man drowning. Oh crap – what have I done?

"Bad, I think." His words are barely audible.

Holy shit!

"I thought you liked it," I whisper.

"I did. At the time."

"Not now?"

He gazes at me, eyes wide, then slowly shakes his head.

Oh my…

"Oh Edward," I mumble, and I'm overwhelmed by the feelings that flood my system. My lost boy. I launch myself at him, kissing his face, his throat, his chest, his little round scars. He groans, pulls me to him, and kisses me passionately. And very slowly, and tenderly, at his pace, he makes love to me once more.

~o~

"Bella Tyson. Punching above your weight!" Jasper applauds as I head into the kitchen for breakfast. He, Alice and Rose are sitting at the breakfast bar while Mrs Bentley cooks waffles. Edward is nowhere to be seen.

"Good Morning, Mrs Cullen," Mrs Bentley beams at me. "What would you like for breakfast?"

"Morning all. Whatever, thank you, Mrs Bentley. Where's Edward?"

"Outside." Rose gestures with her head towards the back yard. I wander over to the window that looks out onto the yard and the mountains behind. It's a clear, powder-blue summer day, and my beautiful husband is in deep discussion with some guy.

"That's Mr Bentley he's talking to," calls Alice from the breakfast bar.

Mrs Bentley's husband is fair-haired, blue eyed and wiry, dressed in work pants and an Aspen Fire department t-shirt. Edward is dressed in his black jeans and t-shirt. As the two men stroll across the lawn, lost in conversation, Edward casually bends to pick up what looks like a bamboo cane that must have been blown over or discarded in the flowerbed. Pausing, Edward absentmindedly holds out the cane at arm's length, as if weighing it carefully, and swipes it through the air, just once.

Oh…

Mr Bentley appears to see nothing odd in his behavior. They continue their tour of the backyard, then pause once more, and Edward repeats the gesture. This time the tip of the cane hits the ground. Glancing up Edward sees me standing at the window. Suddenly I feel as if I'm intruding, spying on him. He blinks. I give him an embarrassed wave, then turn and head back to the breakfast bar.

"What were you doing?" asks Rose.

"Just watching Edward."

"You have got it bad," she snorts.

"And you don't, oh soon-to-be sister-in-law?" I reply, beaming at her – trying to bury the disquieting visual of Edward wielding a cane. I am startled when Rose leaps up and hugs me.

"Sister!" she exclaims, and it's hard not to be swept up in her joy.

~o~

"Hey, sleepyhead." Edward wakes me. "We're coming in to land. Buckle up."

I fumble sleepily for my seat belt, but Edward leans over and fastens it for me. He kisses my forehead before settling back into his seat. I lean my head on his shoulder again and close my eyes. An impossibly long walk, followed by a picnic lunch on top of a spectacular mountain, has exhausted me. The rest of our party is quiet too – even Alice. I peek through my lashes. Edward is working on a contract or something – reading it through and annotating the margins. But he seems relaxed. Emmett is snoring softly beside Rose. Before I fell asleep Edward was taking great delight in filming the dozing Emmett

on his BlackBerry, no doubt in order to blackmail him later. It was odd seeing Edward behaving so childishly – but heartwarming too.

I have yet to corner Emmett to quiz him about Tanya, but it's been impossible to prise him away from Rose. Edward isn't interested enough to ask, which is irritating, but I haven't pressed him – we've been enjoying ourselves too much. Emmett rests his hand possessively on Rose's knee. She's looking radiant… and to think that only yesterday afternoon she was so unsure of him. What did Edward call him? Memet. That was sweet – better than Manwhore. Abruptly Emmett opens his eyes and gazes straight at me. I flush, caught staring.

He grins.

"I sure love your blush, Bella," he teases, stretching. Rose gives me her self-satisfied, cat-got-the-cream smile.

"Now who has it bad?" I tease, and roll my eyes.

She laughs, turns to Emmett and kisses him. Jeez, do they ever leave each other alone? I glance at Edward, who puts the document back into his black leather portfolio and places it on the table in front of him. He eyes Rose and Emmett, then turns to me amused.

"We should have given them the on-board bedroom," he whispers, making me giggle. Officer Beighley announces our approach to Sea Tac, and Edward clasps my hand.

~o~

"How was your weekend, Mrs Cullen?" Edward asks me once we're in the Merc, heading back to Escala. Taylor and Ryan are up front.

"Good, thank you." I smile, feeling shy all of a sudden.

"We can go anytime," he adds. "Take anyone you wish to take."

"We should take my Dad. He'd like the fishing."

"Yes. We will. That's a good idea."

"How was it for you?" I ask, and he blinks at me, surprised by my question.

"Good," he says after a moment. "Real good."

"You seemed to relax."

He shrugs.

"I felt you were safe," he says simply.

I frown.

"Edward, I'm safe most of the time. I've told you before, you'll keel over at forty if you keep up this level of anxiety. And I want to grow old and grey with you." I reach over and grasp his hand. He blinks at me, as if he can't comprehend what I'm saying. Gently taking my sore hand he kisses my knuckles, and changes the subject.

"How's your hand?"

"It's okay. Still stiff. I think I just bruised it," I reassure him.

"We should get a doctor to have a look at it."

"No. It's fine. Just take me home. And stop worrying, please."

He smiles.

"Very well, Mrs Cullen. You ready to face Tanya again?"

Oh crap. I'd forgotten we were seeing her this evening to go over the final plans. I roll my eyes.

"I might want to keep you out of the way, keep you safe." I smirk.

He grins.

"Protecting me?" Edward is laughing at me.

"As ever, Mr Cullen. From all sexual predators," I whisper.

~o~

Edward is brushing his teeth when I clamber into bed. Tomorrow we go back to reality… back to work, and paps, and to James in custody – but with the possibility that he has an accomplice. Hmm… Edward was vague about that. Does he know? And if he did know, would he tell me? I sigh. Getting information out of Edward is like pulling teeth… and we've had such a lovely weekend. Do I want to ruin the feel-good moment by trying to drag the information out of him?

It's been a revelation to see him out of his normal environment, outside this apartment, relaxed and happy with his family. I wonder vaguely if it's because we're here, in this apartment – with all its memories and associations – that he gets wound up. Maybe we should move.

I snort. We are moving – we're having a huge house refurbished on the coast. Tanya's plans are complete and approved, and Emmett's team starts building next week. I chuckle as I recall Tanya's shocked expression when I told her that I'd seen her in Aspen. Who would have thought that her brother was part of a gold and silversmiths' collective there? Emmett had had the engagement ring couriered to his gallery/jewelry store on Saturday for safekeeping. Tanya had merely smoothed the way. For one awful moment I'd thought she'd had a hand in choosing the ring, but apparently not. I still don't trust Tanya… I want to hear the same story from Emmett. At least she kept her distance from Edward this time.

I look out at the night sky. I will miss this view. This panoramic vista… Seattle at our feet, so full of possibilities, yet so far removed. Maybe that's Edward's problem – he was too isolated from real life for too long, thanks to his self-imposed exile. Yet with his family around him, he is less controlling, less anxious… freer, happier. I wonder what Banner would make of all that. Holy crap, maybe that's the answer. Maybe he needs his own family. I shake my head in denial – we're too young. And at that moment Edward strides into the room, looking his usual gorgeous but pensive self.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

He nods distractedly as he climbs into bed.

"I'm not looking forward to going back to reality," I murmur.

"No?" he says as he faces me, surprised.

I shake my head and reach up to caress his lovely face.

"I had a wonderful weekend. Thank you."

He smiles softly.

"You're my reality, Bella," he breathes, and leaning forward he kisses me.

"Do you miss it?" I whisper.

"Miss what?" he asks, perplexed.

"You know. The caning… and-" I shrug, embarrassed.

He stares at me, his gaze impassive. Then doubt crosses his face, his where-is-she-going-with-this look. Reaching up he caresses my cheek.

"No Isabella, I don't." His voice is steady and quiet. "Dr Banner said something to me when you left, something that's stayed with me. He said I couldn't be that way, if you weren't so inclined. It was a revelation." He stops, and frowns. "I didn't know any other way, Bella. Now I do. It's been educational."

"Me, educate you?" I scoff.

His eyes soften.

"Do you miss it?" he asks.

Oh!

"I don't want you to hurt me. But I like to play, Edward, you know that. If you wanted to do something…" I shrug, gazing at him.

"Something?"

"You know, with a flogger, or your crop…" I stop, flushing.

He raises his brow, surprised.

"Well… we'll see," he says. "Right now, I'd like some good old-fashioned vanilla." His thumb skirts my bottom lip, and he kisses me once more.

~o0o~

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Good Morning
Date: 31 August 2009: 09.14
To: Edward Cullen

Mr Cullen
I just wanted to tell you that I love you.
That is all.
Yours Always
B x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Banishing Monday Blues
Date: 31 August 2009: 09.18
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
What gratifying words to hear from one's wife (errant or not) on a Monday morning.
Let me assure you that I feel exactly the same way.
Sorry about the dinner this evening, I hope it won't be too tedious for you.
x

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Oh yes. The American Shipbuilding Association dinner. I roll my eyes… more stuffed shirts. Edward really does take me to the most fascinating functions.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Ships that pass in the night
Date: 31 August 2009: 09.26
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr Cullen
I am sure you can think of a way to spice up the dinner…
Yours in anticipation
Mrs C x

Isabella (non-errant) Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Variety is the Spice of Life
Date: 31 August 2009: 09.35
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
I have a few ideas…
x

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Now Impatient for the ASA Dinner Inc

All the muscles in my belly clench tightly. Hmmm… I wonder what he'll dream up. Hanna knocks on the door, interrupting my reverie.

"Ready to go through your schedule for this week, Bella?" she asks.

"Sure. Sit." I smile, recovering my equilibrium, and minimize my email program.

"I've had to move a couple of appointments. Mr Fox next week and Dr –"

My phone rings, interrupting her. It's Roach. He asks me up to his office.

"Can we pick this up in twenty minutes?"

"Of course."

~o0o~

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Last night
Date: 1 September 2009: 09.24
To: Isabella Cullen

Was… fun.
Who would have thought the ASA annual dinner could be so stimulating?
As ever, you never disappoint, Mrs Cullen.
I love you.
x

Edward Cullen in awe, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: I love a good ball game…
Date: 1 September 2009: 09.33
To: Edward Cullen

Dear Mr Cullen
I have missed the silver balls.
You never disappoint.

That is all.
Mrs C x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

~o~

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Smith
Date: 1 September 2009: 15.24
To: Isabella Cullen

Isabella
For your information: Smith has been refused bail and remanded in custody. He's charged with attempted kidnap and arson.
As yet no date has been set for the trial.

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Smith
Date: 1 September 2009: 15.53
To: Edward Cullen

That's good news.
Does this mean you'll lighten up on security?
I really don't see eye to eye with Jones.
Bella x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Smith
Date: 1 September 2009: 15.59
To: Isabella Cullen

No. Security will remain in place. No arguments.
What's wrong with Jones? If you don't like her, we'll get rid of her.

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I scowl at his high-handed email. Jones isn't that bad, I suppose.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Keep your hair on!
Date: 1 September 2009: 16.03
To: Edward Cullen

I was just asking (rolls eyes). And I'll think about Jones.
Stow that twitchy palm!
Bella x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Don't tempt me
Date: 1 September 2009: 16.11
To: Isabella Cullen

I can assure you Mrs Cullen that my hair is very firmly attached – has this not been demonstrated often enough when you pull it?
My palm however is twitching.
I might do something about that tonight.
x

Edward Cullen, Not bald yet CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Squirm
Date: 1 September 2009: 16.19
To: Edward Cullen

Promises, promises…
Now stop pestering me. I am trying to work.
B x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

~o0o~

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Sailing & Soaring
Date: 7 September 2009: 09.18
To: Edward Cullen

Husband
You sure know how to show a girl a good time.
I shall of course be expecting this kind of treatment every weekend.
You are spoiling me. I love it.
Your loving wife
xox

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: My life's mission…
Date: 7 September 2009: 09.25
To: Isabella Cullen

Is to spoil you Mrs Cullen.
And keep you safe because I love you.

Edward Cullen, CEO
Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Oh my. Could he be any more romantic?

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: My life's mission…
Date: 7 September 2009: 09.33
To: Edward Cullen

Is to let you – because I love you too.
Now stop being so sappy.
You are making me cry.

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

~o0o~

I gaze at the calendar on my desk. Only five days until Saturday 12 – my birthday. I know we are driving out to the house to see how Emmett and his crew are progressing. Hmm… I wonder if Edward has any other plans? I smile at the thought. Hanna taps on my door.

"Come in."

Jones is hovering outside. *Odd*…

"Hi, Bella," says Hanna. "There's a Lauren Elliot here to see you? She says it's personal."

"Lauren Elliot? I don't know a …" My mouth goes dry, and Hanna's eyes widen at my expression.

Lauren? Fuck. What does she want?

Chapter 107/20

"Do you want me to send her away?" Hanna asks, alarmed at my expression.

"Um, no. Where is she?"

"In reception. She's not alone."

Oh!

"And Miss Jones wants to talk to you," Hanna adds.

I'm sure she does.

"Send her in."

Hanna stands aside and Jones enters my office. She's on a mission, bristling with professional security-conscious efficiency.

"Give me a moment, Hanna. Jones, take a seat."

Hanna closes the door, leaving Jones and me alone.

"Mrs Cullen, Lauren Elliot is on your proscribed list of visitors."

I have a proscribed list?

"On our watch list, ma'am," Jones continues. "Taylor and Jenks have been quite specific about not letting her come into contact with you."

I frown, not understanding.

"Is she dangerous?"

"I can't say, ma'am."

"Why do I even know that she's here?"

Jones swallows, and for a moment looks awkward.

"I was on a comfort break. She came in, spoke directly to Claire, and Claire called Hanna."

"Oh. I see." I realize that even Jones has to pee, and I laugh. "Oh dear."

"Yes ma'am." Jones gives me an embarrassed grin, and it's the first time I've seen a chink in her armor. She has a lovely smile.

"I need to talk to Claire about protocol, again," she says, her tone weary.

"Sure. Does Taylor know she's here?" I cross my fingers unconsciously, hoping she hasn't told Edward.

"I left a brief voice-message for him."

Oh.

"Then I only have a short time. I'd like to know what she wants."

Jones gazes at me for a moment.

"I must advise against it, ma'am."

"She's here to see me for a reason."

"I'm supposed to prevent that, ma'am." Her voice is soft, but resigned.

"I really want to hear what she has to say." My tone is more forceful than I intended.

Jones stifles her sigh.

"I'd like to search them both before you do."

"Okay. Can you do that?"

"I'm here to protect you, Mrs Cullen, so yes I can. I'd also like to stay with you while you talk."

"Okay." I'll grant her this concession. Besides, last time I met Lauren she was armed. "Go ahead."

Jones rises.

"Hanna," I call.

Hanna opens the door, rather too quickly. She must have been hovering outside.

"Can you check to see if the meeting room is free, please?"

"I already have, and it's good to go."

"Jones, can you search them in there? Is it private enough?"

"Yes ma'am."

"I'll be there in five minutes, then. Hanna, show Mrs Elliot and whoever she's with into the meeting room.

"Will do." Hanna looks anxiously from Jones to me. "Shall I cancel your next meeting? It's at 4.00 but it's across town."

"Yes," I murmur, distracted. Hanna nods, then leaves.

What the hell does Lauren want? I don't think she's here to do me any harm. She didn't in the past, when she had ample opportunity. *Edward is going to go nuts.* My subconscious purses her lips, primly crosses her legs and nods. I need to tell him that I am doing this. I type a quick email, then pause, checking the time. I feel a momentary pang of regret. We've been getting along so well since Aspen. I press send.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Visitors
Date: 8 September 2009: 15.27
To: Edward Cullen

Lauren is here to see me. I will see her with Jones.
I'll use my newly acquired punching skills with my now healed hand should I need to.
Try, and I mean try, not to worry.
I am a big girl.
Will call once we've spoken.
Bx

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

Hurriedly I hide my BlackBerry in my desk drawer. I stand, smoothing my grey pencil skirt over my hips, pinch my cheeks to give them some color, and undo the next button on my grey silk blouse. Okay, I'm ready. Taking a deep breath I head out of my office to meet Mrs Lauren Elliot, ignoring 'Your Love is King' humming gently from inside my desk.

Lauren looks much better. More than better – she's very attractive. There's a rosy bloom to her cheeks and her hazel eyes are bright, her hair clean and shiny. She's dressed in a pale pink blouse and white pants. She stands as soon as I enter the meeting room, as does

her friend – another dark-haired young woman with soft brown eyes, the color of brandy. Jones hovers in the corner, not taking her eyes off Lauren.

"Mrs Cullen, thank you so much for seeing me," says Lauren, her voice soft but clear.

"Um… Sorry about the security," I mutter, because I cannot think what else to say. I wave a hand distractedly at Jones.

"This is my friend Susie," Lauren continues.

"Hi." I nod at Susie. She looks like Lauren. She looks like me. Oh no. *Another one.*

"Yes," Lauren says, as if reading my thoughts. "Susie knows Mr Cullen too."

What the fuck am I supposed to say to that? I give her a polite smile.

"Please, sit," I murmur.

There's a knock on the door. It's Hanna. I motion her in, knowing full well why she's disturbing us.

"Sorry to interrupt, Bella. I have Mr Cullen on the line?"

"Tell him I'm busy."

"He was quite insistent," she says fearfully.

"I am sure he was. Would you apologize to him, and say I'll call him back very shortly?"

Hanna hesitates.

"Hanna, please."

She nods and scuttles out of the room. I turn back to the two women sitting in front of me. They are both staring at me in awe. It's uncomfortable.

"What can I do for you?" I ask.

Susie speaks.

"I know this is all kinds of weird, but I wanted to meet you too. The woman who captured Edw–"

I hold up my hand, stopping her in mid-flow. I do not want to hear this.

"Um… I get the picture," I mutter.

"We call ourselves the sub-club." She grins at me, her eyes shining with mirth.

Oh My God.

Lauren gasps and gapes at Susie, at once amused and appalled. Susie winces. I think Lauren's kicked her under the table.

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? I glance nervously at Jones, who remains impassive, her eyes never leaving Lauren.

Susie seems to remember herself. She flushes, then nods and stands.

"I'll wait in reception. This is Lulu's show," she says, and I can tell she's embarrassed.

Lulu?

"You'll be okay?" she asks Lauren. Lauren smiles up at her. Susie gives me a large, open, genuine smile, and exits the room.

Susie and Edward… it's not a thought I wish to dwell on.

Jones takes her phone out of her pocket and answers it. I didn't hear it ring.

"Mr Cullen," she says. Lauren and I turn to look at her. Jones closes her eyes as if in pain.

"Yes, sir," she says, and stepping forward hands me the phone.

I roll my eyes.

"Edward," I murmur, trying to contain my exasperation. I stand and stride briskly out of the room.

"What the fuck are you playing at?" he shouts. He's seething.

"Don't shout at me."

"What do you mean don't shout at you?" he shouts, louder this time. "I gave specific instructions which you have completely disregarded – again. Hell, Bella, I am fucking furious."

"When you are calmer, we will talk about this."

"Don't you hang up on me," he hisses.

"Goodbye, Edward." I hang up and switch off Jones's phone.

Holy shit. I don't have long with Lauren. Taking a deep breath I re-enter the meeting room. Both Lauren and Jones look up at me expectantly.

"Where were we?" I ask Lauren as I sit back down opposite her. Her eyes widen slightly.

Yes – apparently I *handle* him, I want to say to her. But I don't think she wants to hear that.

Lauren fiddles nervously with the ends of her hair.

"Firstly, I wanted to apologize," she says softly.

Oh… She glances up and registers my surprise.

"Yes," she says quickly. "And to thank you for not pressing charges. You know – for your car, and in your apartment."

"I know you weren't… um, well," I murmur, reeling. I hadn't expected an apology.

"No," she agrees. "I wasn't."

"You're feeling better now?" I ask gently.

"Much. Thank you."

"Does your doctor know you're here?"

She shakes her head.

Oh.

She nods, looking suitably guilty.

"I know I'll have to deal with the fall-out from that later. But I had to get some things, and I wanted to see Susie, and you, and… Mr Cullen."

"You want to see Edward?" My stomach free-falls to the floor. *That's why she's here.*

"Yes. I wanted to ask you if that would be okay."

Holy fuck. I gape at her, and I want to tell her that it's not okay. I don't want her anywhere near my husband. Why is she here? To assess the opposition? To unsettle me? Or perhaps she needs this as some sort of closure?

"Lauren," I shrug, feeling lost. "It's not up to me, it's up to Edward. You'll need to ask him. He doesn't need my permission. He's a grown man… most of the time."

She gazes at me for a fraction of a beat, as if surprised by my reaction, then laughs softly, nervously twiddling the end of her hair.

"He's repeatedly refused all my requests to see him," she says quietly.

Oh shit. I'm in more trouble than I thought.

"Why is it so important for you to see him?" I ask gently.

She blinks at me, wide-eyed.

"To thank him," she murmurs. "I'd be rotting in a stinking prison psychiatric facility, if it wasn't for him. I know that." She glances down, and runs her finger along the edge of the table. "I suffered a serious psychotic episode, and without Mr Cullen and John – Dr Banner…" She shrugs, and gazes up at me once more, her face full of gratitude.

Once more I'm speechless. What does she expect me to say? Surely she should be saying these things to Edward, not me.

"And for art school. I can't thank him enough for that."

I knew it! Edward is funding her classes. I remain expressionless, exploring my feelings for this woman, now that she's confirmed my suspicions about Edward's generosity. To my surprise I feel no ill-will towards her. It's a revelation – I'm glad she's better. Now, hopefully, she can move on with her life and out of ours.

"Are you missing classes being here?" I ask, because I'm interested.

"Only two. I head home tomorrow."

Oh good.

"What are your plans?"

"Pick up my belongings from Susie, return to Hamden. Continue painting and learning. Mr Cullen already has a couple of my paintings."

What? My stomach plunges into the basement once more. What the hell… are they hanging in my living room? I bridle at the thought.

"What sort of painting do you do?"

"Abstracts, mainly."

"I see." My mind flits through the now-familiar paintings in the great room. Two by Mrs Lauren Elliot… possibly. Jeez.

"Mrs Cullen, can I speak frankly?" she asks, completely oblivious to my warring emotions.

"By all means," I mutter, glancing at Jones, who looks like she's relaxed a little. Lauren leans forward as if to impart a long-held secret.

"I loved Geoff, my boyfriend who died earlier this year." Her voice drops to a sad whisper.

Holy fuck, she's getting personal.

"I'm so sorry," I mutter automatically, but she continues as if she hasn't heard me.

"I loved my husband… and one other," she murmurs.

"My husband," I whisper. The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"Yes." She mouths the word.

This is not news to me. When she lifts her hazel eyes to mine they are wide with conflicting emotions, and the overriding one seems to be fear. Fear of my reaction, perhaps? But my overwhelming response to this poor young woman is… compassion. Mentally I run through all the classical literature I can think of that deals with unrequited love. Swallowing hard, I clutch the moral high ground.

"I know. He's very easy to love," I whisper.

Her wide eyes widen further in surprise, and she smiles.

"Yes. He is. Was," she corrects herself quickly, and blushes. Then she giggles so sweetly that I can't help myself. I giggle too. Yes, Edward Cullen makes us giggly. My subconscious rolls her eyes at me in despair and goes back to reading her dog-eared copy of Jane Eyre. I glance at my watch. Deep down I know Edward will be here soon.

"You'll get your chance to see Edward."

"I thought I would. I know how protective he can be," she smiles.

So this is her scheme. She's very shrewd. *Or manipulative,* whispers my subconscious.

"This is why you're here to see me?"

"Yes."

"I see." And Edward is playing into her hands. Reluctantly I have to acknowledge that she knows him well.

"He seemed very happy. With you," she says.

What?

"How would you know?"

"From when I was in the apartment," she adds cautiously.

Oh hell… how could I forget that!

"Were you there often?"

"No. But he was very different with you."

Do I want to hear this? A shudder runs through me. My scalp prickles as I recall my fear when she was the unseen shadow in our apartment.

"You know it's against the law. Trespassing."

She nods, gazing down at the table. She runs a fingernail along the edge.

"It was only a few times, and I was lucky not to get caught. Again, I need to thank Mr Cullen for that. He could have had me thrown in jail."

"I don't think he'd do that," I murmur.

Suddenly there is a flurry of activity outside the meeting room, and instinctively I know that Edward is in the building. A moment later he bursts through the door and before he closes it I catch Taylor's eye as he stands patiently outside. Taylor's mouth is set in a grim line, and he doesn't return my tight smile. Oh hell, even he's mad at me.

Edward's burning green gaze pins first me, then Lauren to our chairs. His demeanor is quietly determined, but I know better, and I suspect Lauren does too. The menacing

emerald glint in his eyes reveals the truth – he's emanating rage, though he hides it well. In his grey suit, with his dark tie loosened and the top button of his white shirt undone, he looks at once businesslike and casual… and, frankly, hot. His hair is in disarray – no doubt because he's been running his hands through it in exasperation.

Lauren looks nervously down at the edge of the table, running her index finger along the edge again, as Edward looks from me to her and then to Jones.

"You," he says to Jones in a soft tone. "You're fired. Get out now."

I blanch. Oh no – this isn't fair.

"Edward – " I make to stand up.

He holds his index finger up at me in warning.

"Don't," he says, his voice so ominously quiet that I'm immediately silenced, rooted to my seat. Bowing her head Jones walks briskly out of the room to join Taylor. Edward shuts the door behind her and walks to the edge of the table. Holy Crap! That was my fault – and I still have her cell. Edward stands opposite Lauren, and placing both hands on the wooden surface, leans forward.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he growls at her.

"Edward!" I gasp.

Edward ignores me.

"Well?" he demands.

Lauren peeks up at him through long lashes, her eyes wide, her face ashen, her rosy glow gone.

"I wanted to see you, and you wouldn't let me," she whispers.

"So you came here to harass my wife?" His voice is so quiet.

Lauren looks down at the table again. Edward stands glowering at her.

"Lauren, if you come anywhere near my wife again I will cut off all support. Doctors, art school, medical insurance for your folks, all of it – gone. Do you understand?"

Holy crap.

"Edward –" I try again. But he silences me with a chilling look. Holy shit, he's being so unreasonable… My compassion for this sad woman blooms.

"Yes," she breathes.

"What's Susannah doing in reception?"

"She came with me."

He runs a hand through his hair, glaring at her.

"Edward, please," I beg him. "Lauren just wants to say thank you. That's all."

He ignores me, concentrating his wrath on Lauren.

"Did you stay with Susannah while you were sick?"

"Yes."

"Did she know what you were doing, while you were staying with her?"

"No. She was away on vacation."

He strokes his index finger over his lower lip.

"Why do you need to see me? You know you should route any requests through Banner. Do you need something?" His tone has softened, maybe by a fraction of a decibel.

Lauren runs her finger along the edge of the table, again.

Stop bullying her, Edward!

"I had to know," she says. And for the first time she looks up directly at him.

"Had to know what?" he snaps.

"That you're okay."

He blinks at her.

"That I'm okay?" he scoffs.

"Yes."

"I'm fine. There, question answered. Now Taylor will run you to Sea Tac so you can go back to the East Coast. And if you take one step west of the Mississippi it's all gone. Understand?"

Holy Fuck… Edward! I gape at him. What the fuck is eating him? He cannot confine her to one side of the country.

"Yes. I understand," Lauren says quietly.

"Good." Edward's tone is more conciliatory.

"It might not be convenient for Lauren to go back now. She has plans," I object, outraged on her behalf.

Edward glares at me.

"Isabella," he warns, his voice icy, "This does not concern you."

I scowl at him. Of course it concerns me – she's in my office. There must be more to this than I know. He's not being rational. *Fifty shades,* my subconscious hisses at me.

"Lauren came to see me, not you," I murmur petulantly.

Lauren turns to me, her eyes impossibly wide.

"I had my instructions, Mrs Cullen. I disobeyed them." She glances nervously at my husband, then back at me.

"This is the Edward Cullen I know," she says, her tone sad and wistful. Edward frowns at her, while all the breath evaporates from my lungs. I can't breathe. Oh my… Was Edward like this with her all the time? Was he like this with me, at first? I find it hard to remember. Giving me a forlorn smile Lauren rises from the table.

"I'd like to stay until tomorrow. My flight is at noon," she says quietly to Edward.

"I'll have someone collect you at ten to take you to the airport."

"Thank you."

"You're at Susannah's?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

I glare at Edward. He can't dictate to her like this… and how does he know where Susannah lives?

"Goodbye Mrs Cullen. Thank you for seeing me."

I stand and hold out my hand. She takes it gratefully and we shake.

"Um… Goodbye. Good luck," I mutter, because I'm not sure what the protocol is for saying farewell to my husband's ex-submissive. She nods, and turns to him.

"Goodbye… Edward," she says.

Edward's eyes soften a little.

"Goodbye, Lauren." His is voice low. "Dr Banner, remember."

"Yes, sir," she says.

He opens the door to usher her out, but she halts in front of him and looks up. He stills, watching her warily.

"I'm glad you're happy. You deserve to be," she says, and leaves before he can reply. He frowns after her, bemused, then nods to Taylor, who follows Lauren towards the reception area. Closing the door Edward gazes uncertainly at me.

"Don't even think about being angry with me," I hiss. "Call Bastille and kick the shit out of him, or go and see Banner."

His mouth drops open, surprised by my outburst, and his brow creases once more.

"You promised you wouldn't do this." Now his tone is accusatory.

"Do what?"

"Defy me."

"No I didn't. I said I'd be more considerate. I told you she was here. I had Jones search her, and your other little friend too, and Jones was with me the entire time. Now you've fired the poor woman, when she was only doing what I asked. I told you not to worry, yet here you are. I don't remember receiving your papal bull decreeing that I couldn't see Lauren. I didn't know that my visitors were subject to a proscribed list." My voice rises with indignation as I warm to my cause. Edward blinks at me, bemused once more. After a moment his mouth twists.

"Papal bull?" he says, amused, and he visibly relaxes. I wasn't aiming to lighten our conversation, yet here he is smirking at me, and that makes me madder. The exchange between him and his ex was painful to witness – how could he be so cold with her?

"What?" he asks, exasperated, as my face remains resolutely straight.

"You. Why were you so callous towards her?"

He sighs and shifts, stepping towards me and perching on the table.

"Isabella," he says as if to a child. "You don't understand. Lauren, Susannah – all of them – they were a pleasant, diverting pastime. But that's all. You are the center of my universe. And the last time you two were in a room together she had you at gunpoint. I don't want her anywhere near you."

"But Edward, she was ill."

"I know that, and I know she's better now, but I'm not giving her the benefit of the doubt any more. What she did was unforgivable."

"But you've just played right into her hands. She wanted to see you again, and she knew you'd come running if she came to see me."

Edward shrugs as if he doesn't care.

" I don't want you tainted with my old life."

What?

"Edward… you are who you are because of your old life, your new life, whatever. What touches you touches me. I accepted that when I agreed to marry you, because I love you."

He stills, green eyes widening. I know he finds it hard to hear this.

"She didn't hurt me. She loves you too," I murmur.

"I don't give a fuck."

I blink at him, shocked. And I'm shocked that he still has the capacity to shock me.

This is the Edward Cullen I know. Lauren's words rattle round my head. His reaction to her is so cold, so much at odds with the man I've come to know and love. I frown, recalling the remorse he felt when she had her breakdown, when he thought he might in some way be responsible for her pain. I swallow, remembering too that he bathed her. My

stomach twists painfully at the thought and bile rises in my throat. How can he say he doesn't care about her? He did back then. What's changed? Sometimes, like now, I just don't understand him. He operates on a level far, far removed from mine.

"Why are you championing her cause all of a sudden?" he asks, mystified and irritable.

"Look Edward, I don't think Lauren and I will be swapping recipes and knitting patterns anytime soon. But I didn't think you'd be so heartless to her."

His green eyes frost.

"I told you once, I don't have a heart," he mutters.

I roll my eyes – oh, now he *is* being adolescent.

"That's just not true, Edward. You're being ridiculous. You do care about her. You wouldn't be paying for art classes and the rest of that stuff if you didn't."

Suddenly it's my lifetime ambition to make him realize this. It's painstakingly obvious that he cares. Why does he deny it? It's like his feelings for his birth mother. Oh shit – of course. His feelings for Lauren and his other submissives are tangled up with his feelings for his mother. *I like to whip little brown-haired girls like you because you all look like the crack whore.* No wonder he's so mad. I sigh and shake my head. Paging Dr Banner, please. How can he not see this?

My heart swells for him momentarily. My lost boy… Why is it so hard for him to get back in touch with the humanity, the compassion he showed Lauren when she had her breakdown?

He glares at me, his eyes glittering with anger.

"This discussion is over. Let's go home."

I glance at my watch. It's 4.23. I have work to do.

"It's too early," I mutter.

"Home," he insists.

Oh no.

"Edward," I say, my voice weary. "I am tired of having the same argument with you."

He frowns as if he doesn't understand.

"You know," I elucidate. "I do something you don't like and you think of some way to get back at me. Usually involving some of your kinky fuckery which is either mind-blowing or cruel." I shrug, resigned. This is exhausting and confusing.

"Mind-blowing?" he asks.

What?

"Usually, yes."

"What was mind-blowing?" he asks, his eyes now shimmering with amused sensual curiosity. And I know he's trying to distract me.

Crap! I do not want to discuss this in SIP's meeting room. My subconscious examines her finely manicured nails with disdain. *Shouldn't have bought the subject up then*.

"You know," I flush, irritated with both him and myself.

"I can guess," he whispers.

Holy crap. I'm trying to castigate him and he's confounding me.

"Edward, I –"

"I like to please you."

Reaching up he delicately traces his thumb over my bottom lip.

"You do," I acknowledge, my voice a whisper.

"I know," he says softly. He leans forward and whispers in my ear, "It's the one thing I do know." Oh, he smells good. He leans back and gazes down at me, his lips curled in an arrogant, I-so-own-you smile. Pursing my lips I strive to appear unaffected by his touch, strive to ignore the dark yearning that unfurls deep in my belly. He is so artful at diverting me from anything painful, or anything he doesn't want to address.

"What was mind-blowing, Isabella?" he prompts, a wicked gleam in his eye.

"You want the list?" I ask.

"There's a list?" He's pleased.

Oh, this man is exhausting.

"Well, the handcuffs," I mumble, my mind catapulted back to our honeymoon.

His brow furrows. Grasping my hand his thumb traces the pulse point on my wrist.

"I don't want to mark you."

Oh…

His lips curl in a slow carnal smile.

"Come home," he breathes.

"I have work to do."

"Home," he says, insistent.

We gaze at each other, green eyes into brown, testing each other, testing our boundaries and our wills. I search his eyes for some understanding, trying to fathom how this man can go from raging control freak to seductive lover in one breath. His eyes grow larger and darker, his intention clear. Softly he caresses my cheek.

"We could stay here," he breathes, his voice low and husky.

Oh no. My inner goddess gazes longingly down at the wooden table. No. No. No. Not in the office.

"Edward, I don't want to have sex here. Your mistress has just been in this room."

"She was never my mistress," he growls, his mouth flattening into a grim line.

"That's just semantics, Edward."

He frowns, his expression puzzled. The seductive lover has gone.

"Don't over-think this, Bella. She's history," he says dismissively.

I sigh… maybe he's right. I just want him to admit to himself that he cares for her. A chill grips my heart – *Oh no.* This is why it's important to me. Supposing *I* do something unforgivable. Suppose I don't conform. Will I be history too? If he can turn like this… could he turn against me? I gasp, recalling the fragments of a dream: gilt mirrors, and the sound of his heels clicking on the marbled floor, as he leaves me standing alone in opulent splendor.

"No…" I breathe.

"Yes," he whispers, and grasping my chin he leans down and plants a tender kiss on my lips.

"Oh Edward, don't leave me," I murmur, reaching up to grasp his head in my hands, twisting my fingers into his hair and pulling his lips to mine. He stills for a moment as his arms fold around me.

"I have no intention of leaving you, Bella. What's bought this on?"

"Nothing. Kiss me. Take me home," I plead. And as his lips touch mine, I am lost.

~o~

"Oh please," I beg, as Edward blows gently on my sex.

"All in good time," he murmurs.

I pull on my restraints and groan loudly in protest at his carnal assault. I am trussed up in soft leather cuffs, each elbow bound to each knee, and Edward's head bobs and weaves between my legs, his masterful tongue teasing me, relentless. I open my eyes and gaze unseeing at our bedroom ceiling bathed in the soft late afternoon light. His tongue moves round and round, swirling and curling over and around the center of my universe. I want to straighten my legs and struggle in a vain attempt to control the pleasure. But I can't. My fingers fist in his hair and I pull hard to fight his sublime torture.

"Don't come," he murmurs against me, his soft breath on my warm, wet flesh as he resists my fingers. "I will spank you if you come."

I moan.

"Control, Bella. It's all about control." His tongue renews its erotic incursion… oh, he knows what he's doing. I am helpless to resist or stop my slavish reaction and I try – really try – but my body detonates under his merciless ministrations, and his tongue doesn't stop, as he wrings every last ounce of debilitating pleasure from me.

"Oh Bella," he scolds. "You came." His voice is soft with his triumphant reprimand. He flips me onto my front and I shakily support myself on my forearms. He smacks me hard on my behind.

"Ah!" I cry out.

"Control," he breathes, and grabbing my hips he thrusts himself into me. I cry out again, my flesh still quivering from the aftershocks of my orgasm. He stills while deep inside me and leaning over unclips first one, then the second cuff. He wraps his arm around me and

pulls me into his lap, his front to my back, and his hand curls beneath my chin around my throat. I revel in the feeling of fullness.

"Move," he orders.

I moan and rise up and down on his lap.

"Faster," he whispers.

And I move faster, and faster. He groans and his hand tips my head back as he nibbles my neck. His other hand traveling leisurely across my body, from my hip, down to my sex, down to my clitoris… still sensitive from his earlier lavish attention. I whimper as his fingers close around me, teasing me once more.

"Yes, Bella," he rasps softly in my ear. "You are mine. Only you."

"Yes," I breathe as my body tightens again, closing around him, cradling him in the most intimate way.

"Come for me," he demands.

And I let go, as my body obediently follows his command. He holds me still as my climax rips through me and call out his name.

"Oh Bella, I love you," he breathes and follows my lead as he bucks into me, finding his own release.

~o~

He kisses my shoulder and smoothes my hair from my face.

"Does that make the list, Mrs Cullen?" he murmurs.

I am lying, barely conscious, flat on my belly on our bed. Edward gently kneads my backside. He's propped up beside me on one elbow.

"Hmmm."

"Is that a yes?"

"Hmmm." I grin.

He grins and kisses me again, and reluctantly I roll on my side to face him.

"Well?" he asks.

"Yes. It makes the list. But it's a long list."

His face nearly splits in two and he leans forward to kiss me gently.

"Good. Shall we have dinner, Mrs Cullen?" His eyes glow with love and humor.

I nod. I am famished. I reach over to gently pull the little hairs on his chest.

"I want you to tell me something," I whisper.

"What?"

"Don't get mad."

"What is it, Bella?"

"You do care."

His eyes widen, and all trace of his good humor vanishes.

"I want you to admit that you care. Because the Edward I know and love would care."

He stills, his eyes not leaving mine, and I'm witness to his internal struggle – as if he's about to make the judgment of Solomon. He opens his mouth to say something, then closes it again, as some fleeting emotion flits across his face… pain, maybe.

Say it, I will him.

"Yes. Yes, I care. Happy?" His voice is barely a whisper.

Oh, thank fuck for that. It's a relief.

"Yes. Very."

He frowns.

"I cannot believe I am talking to you now, here in our bed, about – " I put my finger to his lips.

"We're not," I murmur. "Let's eat. I'm hungry."

He sighs and shakes his head.

"You beguile and bewilder me, Mrs Cullen."

"Good." I lean up and kiss him.

~o0o~

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: The List
Date: 10 September 2009: 09.33
To: Edward Cullen

That's definitely at the top.

B x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tell Me Something New
Date: 10 September 2009: 09.42
To: Isabella Cullen

You've said that for the last three days.
Make your mind up.
Or… we could try something else.

Edward Cullen, CEO
Enjoying this Game, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I grin at my screen. The last few evenings have been… entertaining. We have relaxed again, Lauren's brief interruption forgotten. I haven't quite worked up the courage to ask if any of her paintings hang on the walls – and frankly, I don't really care. My BlackBerry buzzes and I answer, expecting Edward.

"Bella?"

Who is this?

"Yes?"

"Bella, honey. It's Billy."

"Billy! Hi!" My scalp prickles. What does Charlie's best friend want with me?

"Honey, I'm sorry to call you at work. It's Charlie." His voice falters.

Oh No…

"What is it? What's happened?" My heart leaps into my throat.

"Charlie's been in an accident."

Oh No. Daddy. I stop breathing.

"He's in the hospital. You'd better get here quick."

Chapter 108/21

"Billy, what's happened?" My voice is hoarse and thick with unshed tears. *Daddy!*

"He's been in a car accident."

"Okay, I'll come… I'll come now." Adrenaline has flooded my bloodstream, leaving panic in its wake. I'm finding it difficult to breathe. I clutch the edge of my chair.

"They've transferred him to Portland."

Portland? What the hell is he doing in Portland?

"They airlifted him, Bella. I'm heading there now. OHSU. Oh Bella, I didn't see the car. I just didn't see it…" his voice cracks.

Billy – no!

"I'll see you there." Billy chokes and the line goes dead.

A dark dread seizes me by the throat, overwhelming me. Charlie. No. No. I take a deep steadying breath, pick up the office phone and call Roach. He answers on the second ring.

"Bella?"

"Jerry. It's my father."

"Shit, Bella – what's happened?"

I explain quickly, barely pausing to breathe.

"Go – of course you must go. I hope your father's okay."

"Thank you. I'll keep you informed." Inadvertently I slam the phone down, but frankly right now couldn't care less.

"Hanna!" I call, aware of the anxiety in my voice. Moments later she pokes her head around the door to find me packing my purse and grabbing papers to stuff into my briefcase.

"Yes, Bella?" She frowns.

"My father has been in an accident. I have to go."

"Oh no – "

"Cancel all my appointments today. And Monday. You'll have to finish prepping the ebook presentation – notes are in the shared file. Get Charlotte to help if you have to."

"Yes," Hanna whispers. "I hope he's okay. Don't worry about anything here. We'll muddle through."

"I have my BlackBerry."

The concern etched on her pinched, pale face is almost my undoing.

Daddy.

I grab my jacket, purse and briefcase and head to the door.

"I'll call you if I need anything."

"Do, please. Good luck, Bella. Hope he's okay."

I give her a small tight smile, fighting to maintain my composure, and exit my office. I try hard not to run all the way to reception. Stuart leaps to his feet when I arrive.

"Mrs Cullen?" he asks, confused by my sudden appearance.

"We're going to Portland, now."

"Okay, ma'am," he says, frowning at me but opening the door.

"Mrs Cullen," Stuart asks as we head towards the parking lot. "Can I ask why we're making this unscheduled trip?"

"It's my Dad."

"I see. Does Mr Cullen know?"

"I'll call him from the car."

Stuart nods and opens the rear door to the Volvo SUV and I climb in. My shaking fingers find my BlackBerry, and I dial Edward's cell.

"Mrs Cullen." Angela answers, her voice is crisp and business-like.

"Is Edward there?" I breathe.

"Um… he's somewhere in the building ma'am."

Oh. I groan silently with frustration.

"Can you tell him I called, and that I need to speak with him? It's urgent."

"I could try and track him down. He does have a habit of wandering off sometimes."

"Just get him to call me, please," I beg.

"Certainly, Mrs Cullen." She hesitates. "Is everything all right?"

"No," I sigh. "Please, just get him to call me."

"Yes, ma'am," she says softly, exuding concern. I hang up. I cannot bear it any longer. Pulling my knees up to my chest I curl up on the rear seat and tears ooze, unwelcome, down my cheeks.

"Where in Portland, Mrs Cullen?" Stuart asks gently.

"OHSU," I choke out. "The big hospital."

Stuart pulls out into the street and heads for the I-5, while I keen softly in the back of the car, muttering wordless prayers. *Please let him be okay – Please let him be okay.*

My phone rings, 'Your Love Is King' startling me from my mantra.

"Edward," I gasp.

"Christ, Bella. What's wrong?"

"It's Charlie – he's been in an accident."

"Shit!"

"Yes. I am on my way to Portland."

"Portland? Please tell me Stuart is with you."

"Yes, he's driving."

"Where is Charlie?"

"In OHSU."

I hear a muffled voice in the background.

"Yes Kate," Edward snaps angrily. "I know! Sorry baby – I can be there in about three hours. I have business I need to finish here. I'll fly down."

Oh shit. Echo Charlie is back in commission.

"I have a meeting with some guys over from Taiwan. I can't blow them off. It's a deal we've been hammering out for a few months."

Oh. Why do I know nothing about this?

"I'll leave as soon as I can."

"Okay," I whisper. And I want to say that it's okay, he can stay in Seattle and sort out his business… but the truth is – I want him with me.

"Oh baby," he whispers, and I feel his anguish through the phone.

"I'll be okay, Edward. Take your time. Don't rush. I don't want to worry about you too. Fly safely."

"I will."

"Love you."

"Love you too, baby. He'll be fine. I'll be with you as soon as I can. Keep Ethan close."

"Yes. I will."

"Laters."

"Laters."

I hang up and hug my knees once more. I know nothing about Edward's business. What the hell is he doing with the Taiwanese? I gaze out of the window as we pass Boeing Field-King airport. I hope he flies safely… my stomach knots anew and nausea threatens. Charlie *and* Edward. I don't think my heart could take that. I lean back and start my mantra again: *Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay.*

~o~

"Mrs Cullen." Stuart's voice wakes me. "We're in the hospital grounds. I just have to find the ER."

"I know where it is," I mumble, blinking awake. My mind briefly flits back to my last visit to OHSU, with a twisted ankle from falling off a stepladder at Newtons on my second day there. Mike Newton hovering over me. I shudder at the memory.

Stuart pulls up at the drop-off point and leaps out to open my door.

"I'll go park, ma'am and come and find you. Leave your briefcase, I'll bring it."

"Sure. Thank you… Ethan."

He nods, and I walk briskly into the buzzing ER reception area.

The receptionist at the desk gives me a polite smile. Her hair has been permed and set to within an inch of its life. Not one strand moves independently.

"I'm looking for Charlie Swan? He was airlifted here. He's been in a car accident."

Her expression changes to one of somber concern.

"Let me check the computer," she says kindly.

I scan the waiting area, trying to suppress my anxiety.

"He's been taken to the OR. Number 4, on the third floor. Take the elevators over there."

O.R? Fuck!

"Thank you," I mutter, trying to focus on her directions. My stomach lurches as I make my way over to the elevators.

Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay.

The elevator is agonizingly slow, stopping at each floor. *Come on… Come on!* I will it to move faster, scowling at the people strolling in and out and preventing me from getting to my Dad.

Finally the doors open on the third floor and I head to another reception desk, this one staffed by nurses in navy uniforms.

"Can I help you?" asks one officious nurse with a myopic stare.

"My father, Charlie Swan. He's just been admitted. He's in OR 4, I think?" Even as I say the words I am willing them not to be true.

"Let me check, Miss Swan."

I nod, not bothering to correct her, as she gazes intently at her computer screen.

"Yes. He's been in a couple of hours. If you'd like to wait I'll let them know that you're here. The waiting room's just through there." She points towards a large white door, helpfully labeled WAITING ROOM in bold blue lettering.

"Is he okay?" I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

"You'll have to wait for one of the attending doctors to brief you, ma'am."

"Thank you," I mutter – but inside I am screaming, I WANT TO KNOW NOW!

I open the door to reveal a functional, austere waiting room, where Billy and Jake are seated. Holy fuck.

"Bella!" Billy gasps. He's wearing a neck brace, his arm is in plaster, and his face is badly bruised on one side. He's in his wheelchair, and for a moment I have to remember that he's always been in a wheelchair, and that this is not a result of the accident. I lurch forward and gingerly wrap my arms around him.

"Oh Billy," I sob.

"Bella, honey." His voice is hoarse. Raising his uninjured arm he pats my back.

"I'm so sorry," he mumbles, his voice cracking.

Oh no…

"Hey, Dad…" Jake says softly in admonishment, as he hovers behind me. When I turn he pulls me into his arms and holds me.

"Jake," I mutter. And I am lost – tears falling as all the tension, fear and heartache of the last three hours surface.

"Hey, Bells. Don't cry." Jake gently strokes my hair. I wrap my arms around his neck and softly weep. We stand like that for ages, and I'm so grateful that my best friend is here. We pull apart when Stuart joins us in the waiting room. Billy hands me a tissue from a conveniently-placed box and I dry my tears.

"This is Mr Stuart. Security," I murmur as Stuart looks at us.

Stuart nods politely to Jake and Billy. Jake frowns at him but nods in response, while Billy stares at him blankly. Stuart moves away to take a seat in a far corner.

"Sit down, Bells," says Jake, ushering me towards one of the vinyl-covered armchairs.

"What happened?" I ask. "Do we know how he is? What are they doing?"

Jake holds up his hands to halt my barrage of questions and sits down beside me.

"We don't have any news. Charlie, Dad and I were on a fishing trip to Astoria. We were hit by some stupid fucking drunk – "

Billy tries to interrupt, stammering an apology.

"Don't, Dad!" Jake snaps. "I don't have a mark on me," he continues. "Just a couple of bruised ribs and a knock on the head. Dad… well, Dad broke his wrist. But the car hit the passenger side. And Charlie…"

Oh no… *no*... Panic swamps my limbic system again. No, no, no. My whole body shudders and freezes with a creeping cold.

"He's in surgery. We were taken to the community hospital in Astoria, but they soon airlifted Charlie here. We don't know what they're doing. We're waiting for news."

I start to shake.

"Hey Bells – you cold?"

I nod. I'm in my white sleeveless shirt and black summer jacket, and they provide no warmth. Gingerly Jake pulls off his leather jacket and wraps it around my shoulders.

"Shall I get you some tea, ma'am?" Stuart is by my side.

I nod gratefully at him, and he disappears from the room.

"Why were you fishing in Astoria?" I ask.

Jake shrugs.

"It's supposed to be good there. You know… We were having a boys' get-together. Some bonding time with my old man, before academia heats up for my final year." Jake gazes at me, his dark eyes large and luminous with fear and regret.

"Oh Jake. You could have been hurt too. And Billy… worse." I gulp at the thought. My body temperature drops further and I shudder again. Jake takes my hand.

"Hell, Bella – you're freezing."

Billy inches forward and takes my other hand in his one good hand.

"Bella, I am so sorry."

"Mr Black, please. It was an accident…" My voice fades to a whisper.

"Billy," he corrects me. I give him a weak smile, because that's all I can manage. I shiver once more.

"The police took the asshole into custody. Seven in the morning and the guy was out of his skull," Jake hisses in disgust.

Stuart re-enters bearing a paper cup of hot water and a separate teabag. *He knows how I take my tea!* I'm surprised, and glad of the distraction. Billy and Jake release my hands as I take the cup gratefully from Stuart.

"Do you…?" Stuart asks Billy and Jake. They both shake their heads, and Stuart resumes his seat in the corner. I dunk my teabag in the water and rising shakily dispose of the used bag in a small trashcan.

"What's taking them so long?" I mutter to no one in particular, as I take a sip.

Daddy… Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay.

"We'll know soon enough, Bells," Jake says gently.

I nod and take another sip. I take my seat again beside him.

We wait…

And wait. Billy with his eyes closed, praying I think. Jake holding my hand and squeezing it every now and then. I slowly sip my tea. It's not Twinings, but some cheap and nasty brand, and it tastes disgusting.

I remember the last time I waited for news. The last time I thought all was lost… when Echo Charlie went missing. Closing my eyes I offer up a silent prayer for the safe passage of my husband. I glance at my watch: Two-fifteen. He should be here soon. My tea is cold… ugh.

I stand up and pace. Then sit down again. Why haven't the doctors been to see me? I take Jake's hand, and he gives mine another reassuring squeeze. *Please let him be okay. Please let him be okay.*

Time crawls. Crawls so slowly.

Suddenly the door opens, and we all glance up expectantly, my stomach knotting. *Is this it?*

Edward strides in. His face darkens momentarily when he notices my hand in Jake's.

"Edward," I gasp, and I leap up, thanking God he's arrived safely. Then I'm in his arms and they're wrapped around me. His nose is in my hair, and I'm inhaling his scent, his warmth… his love. And a small part of me feels calmer, stronger and more resilient. Edward is here, with me… oh, the difference his presence makes to my peace of mind.

"What news?" he asks into my hair.

I shake my head, unable to speak. He nods a greeting at Jake.

"Jake," he says.

"Edward," Jake responds. "This is my father, Billy Black."

"Mr Black – we met at the wedding. I take it you were in the accident too?"

Jake briefly retells the story.

"Are you both well enough to be here?" Edward asks.

"We don't want to be anywhere else," Billy says, his voice quiet and laced with pain. Edward nods. Taking my hand he sits me down, then takes a seat beside me.

"Have you eaten?" he asks.

I shake my head.

"Are you hungry?"

I shake my head.

"But you're cold?" he asks, eyeing Jake's jacket.

I nod. He shifts in his chair, but wisely says nothing.

The door opens again, and a young doctor in bright blue scrubs enters. He looks exhausted and harrowed.

Oh no… All the blood seems to disappear from my head as I stumble to my feet.

"Charlie Swan," I whisper as Edward stands beside me, putting his arm around my waist.

"You're his next of kin?" the doctor asks. His bright blue eyes almost match his scrubs, and under any other circumstances I would say he was attractive.

"I'm his daughter Bella."

"Miss Swan – "

"Mrs Cullen," Edward interrupts him.

"My apologies," the doctor stammers, and for a moment I want to kick Edward. "I'm Doctor Crowe. Your father is stable, but in a critical condition."

Oh fuck… what does that mean? My knees buckle beneath me, and only Edward's supporting arm prevents me from falling to the floor.

"He suffered severe internal injuries," Doctor Crowe continues, "Principally to his diaphragm, but we've managed to repair them, and we were able to save his spleen. Unfortunately he suffered a cardiac arrest during the operation because of the blood loss. We managed to get his heart going again, but this remains a concern. However, our gravest concern is that he suffered severe contusions to the head, and the MRI shows that he has swelling in his brain. We've induced a coma to keep him quiet and still. We need to continue monitoring the brain swelling."

Brain damage? No…

"It's standard procedure in these cases. For now, we just have to wait and see."

"And what's the prognosis?" Edward asks coolly.

"Mr Cullen, it's difficult to say at the moment. It's possible he could make a complete recovery, but that's in God's hands now."

"How long will you keep him in a coma?"

"That depends on how his brain responds. Usually 72 to 96 hours."

Oh no… so long!

“Can I see him?” I whisper.

“He’s been taken up to the ICU on the sixth floor. Yes, you should be able to see him in about half an hour.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

Doctor Crowe nods, turns and leaves us.

“Well, he’s alive,” I whisper to Edward. And the tears start to roll down my face once more.

“Sit down,” Edward orders gently, and leads me back to my seat.

“Dad, I think we should go,” Jake murmurs to Billy. “You need to rest. We won’t know anything for a while.”

Billy gazes blankly at his son.

“We can come back this evening, after you’ve rested. That’s okay, isn’t it, Bells?” Jake turns, imploring me.

“Of course.”

“Are you staying in Portland?” Edward asks.

Jake nods.

“Do you need a ride home?”

Jake’s brow furrows.

“I was going to order a cab.”

“Ethan can take you.”

Stuart stands, and Jake looks momentarily confused.

“Ethan Stuart,” I murmur, in clarification.

“Oh… Sure. Yeah, we’d appreciate it. Thanks, Edward.”

I stand up shakily, and hug Billy and Jake in quick succession.

"Stay strong, Bells," Jake whispers in my ear. "He's a fit and healthy man. The odds are in his favor."

"Oh Jake, I hope so." I hug him hard. Then, releasing him, I shrug off his jacket hand it back to him.

"Keep it, if you're still cold."

"No, I'm okay. Thanks." Glancing nervously up at Edward I see that he's regarding us impassively. Edward takes my hand.

"If there's any change I'll let you know right away," I add to Jake.

He pushes his father's wheelchair towards the door, which Stuart holds open. Billy raises his hand and they pause in the doorway.

"He's in my prayers, Bella," Billy says, his voice wavering. "He's my best friend."

"I know."

And with that they leave.

Edward and I are alone. Reaching up he caresses my cheek.

"You're pale," he whispers. "Come here." He sits down on the chair and pulls me on to his lap, folding me into his arms again, and I go willingly. I snuggle up against him, feeling oppressed by my father's misfortune, but grateful that my husband is here to comfort me. Edward smells so good… He gently strokes my hair and holds my hand.

"How was Echo Charlie?" I breathe.

He grins.

"Oh, she was yar," he says, quiet pride in his voice.

It makes me smile properly for the first time in several hours, and I glance at him, puzzled.

"Yar?"

"It's a line from 'The Philadelphia Story'. Esme's favorite film."

"I don't know it."

"I think I have it on blu-ray. We can watch it, and make out." He kisses my hair and I smile once more.

"Can I persuade you to eat something?" he asks.

My smile disappears.

"Not now. I want to see Charlie first."

His shoulders slump, but he doesn't push me.

"How were the Taiwanese?"

"Amenable," he says.

"Amenable how?"

"They let my buy their shipyard at the price I wanted to pay."

Oh. *He's bought a shipyard?*

"That's good?"

I feel his smile.

"Yes. That's good."

"But I thought you had a shipyard, over here."

"I do. We're going to use that to do the fitting-out. Build the hulls in the Far East. It's cheaper."

Oh.

"What about the workforce at the shipyard here?"

"We'll redeploy. We should be able to keep redundancies to a minimum." He kisses my hair.

"Shall we go?" he asks, his voice soft.

I don't want to move. I want to enjoy this moment with Edward, and not face the grim reality of my father broken and in pain… but part of me wants to check that Charlie's still with us, still alive.

"Yes," I breathe.

~o~

The ICU on the sixth floor is an extraordinary place, a stark, sterile but functional ward. Four patients are each housed in their own separate area, attached to hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of hi-tech equipment. Charlie is at the far end.

Daddy.

He looks so small in his large bed, surrounded by all this technology. It's a shock: my Dad has never been small. There's a tube in his mouth, and various lines pass through drips into a needle in each arm. A small clamp is attached to his finger. I wonder vaguely what that's for. His leg is on top of the sheets, encased in a blue plastic cast. A monitor blips his heart rate: Blip, blip, blip. Strong and steady. Charlie's heart is strong. This I know. I move slowly towards him. His chest is naked, and a large livid scar, crudely stapled together, runs down his chest and disappears beneath the thin sheet that protects his modesty.

Daddy.

I realize that the tube pulling at the right corner of his mouth leads to a ventilator. Its noise is weaving with the blip, blip, blip of his heart monitor into a percussive rhythmic beat. Sucking, expelling, sucking, expelling, sucking, expelling… in time with the blips. There are four lines on the screen of his heart monitor, each moving steadily across, demonstrating clearly that Charlie is still with us.

Oh Daddy…

Tentatively I reach for his hand. Even though his mouth is distorted by the ventilator tube he looks so peaceful, lying there fast asleep.

A petite young nurse stands to one side, checking his monitors.

"Can I touch him?" I ask her.

"Yes," she smiles kindly. 'Christie RN', it says on her badge. She must be in her twenties. She's blond, with dark, dark eyes.

Edward stands at the end of the bed, watching me carefully as I clasp Charlie's hand. It's surprisingly warm, and that's my undoing. I sink on to the chair by the bed, place my head gently against Charlie's arm, and I start to sob.

"Oh Daddy. Please get better," I whisper. "Please."

Edward is at my side. He puts his hand on my shoulder and gives it a reassuring squeeze.

"All Mr Swan's vitals are good," Nurse Christie says quietly.

"Thank you," Edward murmurs. I glance up in time to see her flush and gape. She's finally gotten a good look at my husband. I don't care… She can gape at Edward all she likes, as long as she makes my father well again.

"Can he hear me?" I ask.

"He's deeply asleep, ma'am. But who knows?"

"Can I sit for a while?"

"Sure thing," she smiles at me, her cheeks still pink from her telltale blush. Incongruously I find myself thinking blond is not her true color.

Edward gazes down at me, ignoring her.

"I need to make a call. I'll be outside. I'll give you some alone time with your Dad."

I nod. He bends, kisses my hair, and stalks out of the ward. I sit and hold Charlie's hand, marveling at the irony that it's only now, when he's unconscious and can't hear me, that I really want to tell him how much I love him. Very quietly, so as not to disturb anyone, I tell him about our weekend in Aspen, and about last weekend, when we were soaring and sailing aboard the Esme. I tell him about our new house, our plans, about how we hope to make it ecologically sustainable. I promise to take him with us to Aspen so he can go fishing with Edward, and assure him that Billy and Jake will both be welcome too… *Please be here to do that, Daddy, please.*

Charlie remains immobile, the ventilator sucking and expelling, and the monotonous but reassuring blip, blip, blip of his heart monitor his only response.

When I look up Edward is sitting quietly at the end of the bed. I don't know how long he's been there.

"Hi," he says, his green eyes glowing with compassion and concern.

"Hi."

"So, I'm going fishing with your Dad, Billy and Jake?" he says softly, amused yet wary.

I nod.

"Okay. Let's go eat. Let your Dad sleep in peace."

I frown. I don't want to leave him.

"Bella, he's in a coma. I've given our cell numbers to the nurses here. If there's any change they'll call us. We'll eat, check into a hotel, rest up, then come back this evening."

~o~

The suite at the Heathman looks just as I remember it. How often I've thought about that first night and morning I spent with Edward Cullen… now my husband. I stand in the entrance to the suite, paralyzed. Jeez, it all started here.

"Home away from home," says Edward softly, putting my briefcase down beside one of the overstuffed couches.

"Do you want a shower? A bath? What do you need, Bella?" Edward gazes at me, and I can tell he's lost. My lost boy, events beyond his control. He's been quiet, withdrawn and contemplative all afternoon. This is a situation he cannot manipulate and predict. This is real life in the raw, and he's kept himself from that for so long, he's exposed and helpless now. My sweet Fifty Shades.

"A bath. I'd like a bath." I murmur, aware that keeping him busy will make him feel better, make him feel useful. Oh Edward – I'm numb and I'm cold and I'm scared – but I'm so glad you're here with me.

"Bath. Good. Yes." He strides into the bedroom and onwards out of sight into the palatial ensuite. A few moments later I hear the roar of water gushing to fill the tub.

Finally I galvanize myself to move, and follow him into the bedroom. I'm dismayed to see several bags from Nordstum on the bed. Edward re-enters, sleeves rolled up, tie and jacket discarded.

"I sent Taylor to get some things. Nightwear. You know," he says, eyeing me warily.

Of course he did. I nod my approval… *Where is Taylor?*

"Oh Bella," Edward murmurs. "I've not seen you like this. You're normally so brave and strong."

I don't know what to say. I merely gaze wide-eyed at him. I have nothing, nothing to give right now… I think I'm in shock. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to keep the pervading cold at bay, even though I know it's a fruitless task, as this cold comes from within. Edward pulls me into his arms.

"Baby, he's alive. His vital signs are good. We just have to be patient," he murmurs. "Come." Releasing me he takes my hand and leads me into the bathroom. Gently he slips my jacket off my shoulders and places it on the bathroom chair, then turning back he starts undoing the buttons on my shirt.

~o~

The water is deliciously warm and fragrant, the smell of lotus blossom heavy in the warm, sultry air of the bathroom. I lie between Edward's legs, my back to his front, my feet resting on top of his. We're both quiet and introspective, and I'm finally feeling warm. Intermittently Edward kisses my hair as I absentmindedly pop the bubbles in the foam.

"You didn't get into the bath with Lauren, did you? That time you bathed her?" I ask.

He stiffens, then snorts, his hands tightening on his knees where they rest.

"Um… No." He sounds astounded.

"I thought so. Good."

Lifting his hand he tugs gently at my hair, knotted in a crude bun at the back of my head, tilting my head round so he can see my face.

"Why do you ask?"

I shrug.

"Morbid curiosity. I don't know… seeing her this week."

His face hardens.

"I see. Less of the morbid, please." His tone is reproachful.

"How long are you going to support her?

He shrugs.

"Until she's on her feet. I don't know. Why?"

"Are there others?"

"Others?"

“Exes that you support.’

“There was one, yes. No longer though.”

“Oh?”

“She was studying to be a doctor. She’s qualified now and has… someone else.”

“A dominant?”

“Yes.”

“Lauren says you have two of her paintings,” I whisper.

“I used to. I wasn’t keen on them. They had technical merit, but they were too colorful for me. I think Emmett has them. As we know, he has no taste.”

I giggle, and he wraps his arms around me, sloshing water over the side of the bath.

“That’s better,” he breathes and kisses my temple.

“He’s marrying my best friend.”

“Then I’d better shut my mouth,” he says.

~o~

I feel more relaxed after our bath. Wrapped in my soft Heathman robe I gaze at the various bags on the bed. Jeez… this must be more than nightwear. Tentatively I peek into one. A pair of jeans and a pale blue hooded sweatshirt, my size. Holy Crow… Taylor’s bought a whole weekend’s worth of clothes.

“Apart from harassing me at Newtons, have you ever actually gone into a store and just bought stuff?”

“Harassing you?”

“Yes. Harassing me.”

“You were very flustered, if I recall. And that young boy was all over you. What was his name?”

“Mike.”

"One of your many admirers."

I roll my eyes at him and he smiles – a relieved, genuine smile. He leans over and kisses me.

"That's my girl," he whispers. "Get dressed. I don't want you getting cold again."

~o~

"Ready," I murmur. Edward is working on the Mac in the study area of the suite. He's dressed in black jeans and a grey cable-knit sweater, and I'm wearing the jeans, the hoodie and a white t-shirt.

"You look so young," Edward says softly, glancing up, his eyes glowing. "And to think you'll be a whole year older tomorrow." His voice is wistful.

I give him a crooked smile.

"I don't feel much like celebrating. Can we go see Charlie now?"

"Sure. I wish you'd eat something. You barely touched your lunch."

"Edward, please. I'm just not hungry. Maybe after we've seen Charlie. I want to wish him goodnight."

~o~

As we arrive at the ICU we meet Jake leaving. He's alone.

"Bella, Edward, hi," he says.

"Where's Billy?"

"He was too tired to come back. He was in a car accident this morning," Jake grins ruefully. "And his painkilling meds have kicked in. He was out for the count. I had to fight to get into see Charlie, since I'm not next of kin."

"And?" I ask anxiously.

"He's good, Bella. Same… but all good."

Relief floods my system. No news is good news.

"See you tomorrow, birthday girl?"

"Sure. We'll be here."

Jake eyes Edward quickly, then pulls me into a brief hug.

"Mañana."

"Goodnight, Jake."

"Goodbye, Jake," Edward says.

Jake nods and heads on down the corridor.

"He's still nuts about you," Edward says quietly.

"No he's not. And even if he is, who cares?"

Edward gives me a tight smile, and my heart melts.

"Well done," I murmur.
He frowns.

"For not frothing at the mouth."

He gapes at me, wounded – but amused too.

"I've never frothed. Let's see your Dad. I have a surprise for you."

"Surprise?" My eyes widen in alarm.

"Come." Edward takes my hand and we head through the double doors into the ICU.

Standing at the end of Charlie's bed is Carlisle, in deep discussion with Crowe and a second doctor, a woman I've not seen before. Seeing us, Carlisle beams. *Oh, thank heavens.*

"Edward." He shakes Edward's hand, then turns to me and folds me in his warm embrace, taking me by surprise.

"Bella. How are you bearing up?"

"I'm fine. It's my father I'm worried about."

"He's in good hands. Doctor Sluder is an expert in her field. We trained together in Detroit."

Oh…

"Mrs Cullen," Doctor Sluder greets me very formally. She's short-haired and elfin, with a shy smile and a soft southern accent "As the lead physician for your father, I'm pleased to tell you that all is on track. His vital signs are stable and strong. We have every faith that he'll make a complete recovery. The brain swelling has stopped, and shows signs of decreasing. This is very encouraging after such a short time."

"That's good news," I breathe. She smiles warmly at me. "It is, Mrs Cullen. We're taking real good care of him."

"Great to see you again, Carlisle." She smiles at him… *oh*... and I suspect that they were once more than friends.

Carlisle grins back.

"Likewise, Lorraina."

"Doctor Crowe, let's leave these good people to visit with Mr Swan." Crowe follows in Doctor Sluder's wake towards the exit.

I glance over at Charlie, and for the first time I feel more hopeful. Doctor Sluder and Carlisle's kind words have given me hope. Carlisle gently puts his hand on my shoulder.

"Bella, sweetheart, sit with him. Talk to him. It's all good. I'll visit with Edward in the waiting room."

I nod my assent. Edward smiles at me, and he and Carlisle leave me with my beloved father, sleeping peacefully to the gentle lullaby of his ventilator and heart monitor.

~o~

I slip Edward's white t-shirt on and clamber into bed.

"You seem brighter," Edward says cautiously as he pulls on his pjs.

"Yes. I think talking to Doctor Sluder and your Dad made a big difference. Did you ask Carlisle to come here?"

Edward slides into bed and pulls me into his arms, turning me to face away from him.

"No," he breathes against my ear. "He wanted to come and check on your Dad himself."

"How did he know?"

"I called him this morning."

Oh.

"Baby, you're exhausted. You should sleep."

"Hmm," I murmur in agreement. He's right… I am so tired. It's been an emotional day, and I'm a tiny bit relieved that he hasn't jumped on me. In fact, he's had a totally hands-off approach to me all day… Is this a first? I wonder if I should be alarmed by this turn of events… but since my inner goddess has left the building and taken my libido with her, I'll think about it in the morning. I turn over and snuggle against Edward, wrapping my leg over his.

"Promise me something," he says softly.

"Hmm?" It's a question that I am too tired to articulate.

"Promise me you'll eat something tomorrow. You wearing another man's jacket, I can just about tolerate without frothing at the mouth. But Bella… you must eat. Please."

"Hmm," I acquiesce.

I feel his smile as he kisses my hair.

"Thank you for being here," I mumble and sleepily kiss his chest.

"Where else would I be? Home is wherever you are, Bella. Being here makes me think of how far we've come. And the night I first slept with you. What a night that was. You were just… yar," he breathes.

I smile against his chest.

" Sleep," he murmurs, and it's a command. I close my eyes and drift.

Chapter 109/22

I stir, opening my eyes to a bright September morning. Warm and comfortable between clean, crisp sheets, I take a moment to orientate myself, and am overwhelmed by a sense of déja vu. Of course – I'm at the Heathman.

"Shit! Daddy!" I gasp out loud recalling, with a gut-wrenching surge of apprehension that twists my heart and starts it pounding, why I'm in Portland.

"Hey." Edward is sitting on the edge of the bed. He strokes my cheek with his knuckles, instantly calming me. "I called the ICU this morning. He spent a comfortable night. It's all good," he says reassuringly.

"Oh. Good. Thank you," I mutter, turning over to gaze wide-eyed at him. He bends and kisses my forehead.

"Good morning, Bella," he whispers, and kisses my temple.

"Hi," I breathe. He's up and dressed, in black t-shirt and blue jeans.

"Hi," he replies, his eyes soft and warm – oh he looks delicious… my beautiful husband.

"I want to wish you happy birthday," he murmurs. "Is that okay?"

I offer him a tentative smile, and reach up to caress his cheek.

"Yes, of course," I reply. "Thank you. For everything."

His brow furrows.

"Everything?"

I nod.

"Everything."

He looks momentarily confused, but it's fleeting. His eyes widen with anticipation.

"Here." He hands me a small, exquisitely wrapped box with a tiny gift card. I sit up. In spite of the worry I feel about my father, I sense Edward's anxiety and excitement, and it's infectious. I read the card.

For all our firsts on your first birthday as my beloved wife.
I love you.
E x

Oh my… how sweet is that?

"I love you too," I murmur, smiling at him.

He grins.

"Open it," he breathes. I do as I'm bid. Unwrapping the paper carefully so it doesn't tear, I find a beautiful red leather box. *Cartier*, I know – thanks to my second-chance earrings. Cautiously I open the box to discover a delicate charm bracelet of silver, or platinum or white gold – I don't know, but it's absolutely enchanting. Attached to it are several charms: the Eiffel Tower, a London black cab, a helicopter – Echo Charlie! – a glider – the soaring… a catamaran – The Esme. A bed! And… an ice cream cone? I look up at him, bemused.

"Vanilla?" He shrugs apologetically. I can't help but laugh. Of course.

"Edward, this is beautiful. Thank you. It's yar."

He grins. My favorite is the heart. It's like a locket, and I can open it.

"You can put a picture or whatever in that," he mutters.

"A picture of you," I murmur, glancing up at him through my lashes. "Always in my heart."

He smiles his lovely, heart-aching, shy smile. Gazing down I fondle the last two charms: a letter E – oh yes, I was his first girlfriend – or whatever – to use his given name… I smile at the thought. And finally, there's a key.

"To my heart and soul," he whispers. Tears prick my eyes. I launch myself at him, curling my arms around his neck and settling into his lap.

"It's such a thoughtful present. I love it. Thank you," I murmur against his ear. Oh, he smells so good – clean, and wholesome, of fresh linen and body wash and Edward. Like home, my home. I recall his words from last night: *Home is wherever you are, Bella.* My threatened tears begin to fall.

He groans softly and enfolds me in his embrace.

"I don't know what I'd do without you," I whisper, my voice cracking as I try to hold back my overwhelming swell of emotion. He swallows hard, and tightens his hold on me.

"Please don't cry," he whispers into my hair.

I sniff in rather unladylike way.

"I'm sorry. I'm just so happy, and sad, and anxious at the same time."

"Hey." His voice is feather soft. Tipping my head back he plants a gentle kiss on my lips. "I understand," he murmurs.

Oh.

"I know," I whisper, and I'm rewarded with his shy smile again.

"I wish we were in happier circumstances and at home. But we're here." He shrugs apologetically once more. "Come, up you get. After breakfast, we'll check on Charlie." He kisses me gently once more, releases me and stands up.

~

My appetite makes a brief but welcome return during breakfast in our suite. I know Edward is pleased to see me eating my granola and Greek yogurt.

"Thank you for ordering my favorite breakfast."

"It's your birthday," Edward says softly. "And you have to stop thanking me." He rolls his eyes in exasperation, but fondly, I think.

"I just want you to know that I appreciate it."

"Isabella, it's what I do." He gazes at me, green eyes wide and serious. Of course, Edward in command and control. How could I forget… and would I want him any other way? I smile at him.

"Yes, it is," I agree.

He gives me a puzzled look, then shakes his hand.

"Shall we go?"

"I'll just brush my teeth."

He smirks.

"Okay."

Why is he smirking? The thought nags me as I head into the ensuite. A memory springs unbidden to my mind: that I used his toothbrush when I first spent the night with him. I smirk into the mirror, and grab his toothbrush, in homage to that first time. Gazing at myself in the mirror I take a quick inventory: in my summer jacket, clean white t-shirt and jeans, I look my usual pale self. My hair is artfully tied in a ponytail high on my head that swings down behind me, soft tendrils escaping around my face. I'm twenty-two – getting old. Briefly I marvel at how much has happened to me since I graduated. What a journey I've been on… and now here I am, back in Portland. I need to clear my head, and to distract myself I put on a little mascara and some lip-gloss. There, that will do.

I hold up my wrist and shake it, and the charms on my bracelet give a satisfying rattle. How does my sweet Fifty always know exactly the right thing to give me? I blink rapidly, attempting to stem the emotion still lurking in my system, and gaze down at the bracelet once more. I bet it cost a fortune… ah well. He can afford it.

As we walk to the elevators Edward takes my hand and kisses my knuckles, his thumb brushing over Echo Charlie on my bracelet.

"You like?"

"More than like. I love it. Very much. Like you."

He smiles and kisses my knuckles once more. I feel lighter than I did yesterday. Perhaps because it's morning, and the world always seems a more hopeful place in the morning than in the dead of night. Or maybe it's my husband's sweet wake-up. Or maybe it's knowing that Charlie is no worse.

As we step into the empty elevator I glance up at Edward. His eyes flicker quickly down to mine, and he smirks again.

"Don't," he whispers as the doors shut.

"Don't what?"

"Look at me like that."

"Fuck the paperwork," I mutter softly, grinning. He laughs, and it's such a carefree, boyish sound. He tugs me into his arms and tilts my head up.

"Someday I'll rent this elevator, for a whole afternoon."

"Just the afternoon?" I arch my brow.

"Mrs Cullen, you are greedy."

"When it comes to you, I am."

"I'm very glad to hear it." He kisses me gently, a chaste kiss. And I don't know if it's because we are in *this* elevator, or because he's not touched me in over twenty-four hours, or if he's just the most intoxicating man I have ever met… but desire unwinds and stretches, deep in my belly. I run my fingers into his hair and deepen the kiss, pushing him against the wall, bringing my body flush against his. He groans into my mouth and cups my head, cradling me as we kiss – really kiss, our tongues exploring the oh-so-familiar, oh-so new, oh-so exciting territory that is the other's mouth. My inner goddess swoons, bringing my libido back from purdah. I caress his dear, dear face in my hands.

"Bella," he breathes.

"I love you, Edward Cullen. Don't forget that," I whisper as I gaze into darkening green eyes.

The elevator comes smoothly to a halt and the doors open.

"Let's go and see your father before I decide to rent this today," he murmurs. He kisses me quickly, takes my hand and leads me into the lobby.

As we walk past the concierge Edward gives a discreet signal to the kindly middle-aged man standing behind the desk. He nods and picks up his phone. I glance questioningly at Edward and he gives me his secret smile. Oh no… what's this? I frown at him, and for a moment he looks nervous.

"Where's Taylor?" I ask.

"We'll see him shortly."

Of course, he's probably fetching the car.

"Stuart?"

"Running errands."

What errands?

Edward avoids the revolving door, and I know it's so he doesn't have to release my hand. The thought warms me. Outside it's a mild late-summer morning: the air is clear but

I can smell the coming fall in the breeze. I glance round, looking for the Mercedes SUV and Taylor. No sign. Edward's hand tightens around mine and I look up at him. He seems anxious.

"What is it?"

He shrugs. The hum of an approaching car engine distracts me. It's throaty… familiar. As I turn to find the source of the noise it stops suddenly. Taylor is clambering out of a sleek white sports car parked in front of us. *What?*

Oh shit! *It's an R8.* My head whips back to Edward, who's watching me warily. *You can buy me one for my birthday… a white one I think.*

"Happy birthday," he says quietly. I know he's gauging my reaction. I gape at him, because that's all I can do. He holds out a key.

"You are completely over the top," I whisper. *He's bought me a fucking Audi R8! Holy Shit. Like I asked!* My face splits in a huge grin and my inner goddess does a back flip off the high diving board. I jump up and down on the spot in a moment of unguarded, unbridled, unparalleled over-excitement. Edward's expression mirrors mine and I dance forward into his waiting arms. He swings me round.

"You have more money than sense," I whoop. "I love it! Thank you!" He stops and dips me low suddenly, startling me, so that I have to grasp his upper arms.

"Anything for you, Mrs Cullen," he grins down at me. *Oh my.* What a very public display of affection. He bends and kisses me, and I wind my fingers into his hair.

"Let's go see your Dad."

"Yes. And I get to drive?"

He grins down at me.

"Of course. It's yours."

He stands me up and releases me, and I hurry round to the driver's door. Taylor opens it for me, smiling broadly.

"Happy Birthday, Mrs Cullen."

"Thank you, Taylor." I startle him by giving him a swift hug, which he returns awkwardly. He's still blushing when I climb into the car, and he closes the door promptly once I'm inside.

"Drive safe, Mrs Cullen," he says gruffly. I beam up at him, barely able to contain my excitement.

"Will do," I promise.

I put the key in the ignition as Edward stretches out beside me.

"Take it easy. Nobody chasing us now," he warns. When I turn the key the engine thunders into life. I check the rearview mirror and the side mirror, and spotting a rare moment of clear traffic execute a huge perfect u-turn and roar off in the direction of OSHU.

"Whoa!" Edward exclaims, alarmed.

"What?"

"I don't want you in the ICU beside your father. Slow down."

He's not to be argued with. I ease off the accelerator and grin at him.

"Better?"

"Much," he mutters, trying hard to look stern – and failing miserably.

~

Charlie's condition is the same. Seeing him grounds me after the heady road trip here… I really should drive more carefully. You can't legislate for every drunk driver in this world. I must ask Edward what's become of the asshole who hit Charlie – I'm sure he knows. In spite of the tubes my father looks comfortable, and I think he has little more color in this cheeks. While I sit beside my Dad and tell him about my morning, Edward wanders off to the waiting room to take a phone call. I tell my father about my bracelet, explain some of the charms but not all of them, and of course, extol the virtues of the R8. *Oh Daddy, you'd love the car!* Nurse Christie hovers over him, checking his lines and making notes on his graph. She smiles kindly at me.

"All his signs are good, Mrs Cullen," she murmurs.

"That's very encouraging."

Dr Crowe appears with two nursing assistants.

"Mrs Cullen," he greets me warmly. "Time to take your father up to radiology. We're giving him a CT scan. To see how his brain is doing."

"Will you be long?"

"Up to an hour."

"I'll wait. I'd like to know."

"Sure thing, Mrs Cullen. Take a seat in the waiting room."

Edward is pacing in the waiting room, talking on the phone, which is otherwise thankfully empty. As he speaks he gazes out of the window, enjoying the panoramic view of Portland. He turns to me when I shut the door, and he looks angry.

"How many units above the limit? … I see … All charges, everything. My wife's father is in the ICU – I want you to throw the fucking book at him … Good. Keep me informed." He hangs up.

"The other driver?"

He nods.

"Some drunken trailer trash from Southeast Portland," he sneers, and I'm shocked by his terminology and his derisory tone. He walks over to me, and his tone softens.

"Finished with Charlie? Do you want to go?"

"Um… no." I blink up at him, still reeling at his display of contempt.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Charlie's being taken to radiology for a CT scan, to check the swelling in his brain. I'd like to wait for the results."

"Okay. We'll wait." He sits down and holds out his hands. As we're alone, I go willing and curl up in his lap.

"This is not how I envisaged spending today," Edward murmurs into my hair.

"Me neither, but I'm feeling more positive now. Carlisle was very reassuring. It was kind of him to come last night."

Edward strokes my back soothingly, resting his chin on my head.

"My father is a good man," he murmurs.

"He is. I should call Mom. Tell her about Charlie."

Edward stiffens slightly.

"I'm surprised she hasn't called me," I murmur, puzzled. In fact I'm slightly hurt. It's my birthday, after all, and she was there when I was born. Why hasn't she called?

"Maybe she did," Edward says. I fish my BlackBerry out of my pocket. It shows no missed calls, but quite a few texts: happy birthdays from Rose, Jake, Alice and Jasper. Nothing from my mother. I shake my head despondently.

"Call her now," he says softly.

I do, but there's no reply, just the answering machine. I don't leave a message. How can my own mother forget my birthday? I roll my eyes.

"She's not there. I'll call later. When I know the result of the brain scan."

Edward tightens his arms around me, nuzzling my hair once more, and wisely makes no comment on my mother's lack of maternal concern.

I feel rather than hear the buzz of his BlackBerry. He doesn't let me stand up, but fishes it awkwardly out of his pocket.

"Angela," he snaps, businesslike again. I make another move to stand and he stops me, frowning, holding me tightly round my waist. I nestle back against his chest and listen to the one-sided conversation.

"Good … ETA is what time? … And the other um… packages?" Edward glances at his watch. "Does the Heathman have all the details? … Good … Yes. It can hold until Monday morning, but email just in case – I'll print, sign and scan it back to you … They can wait. Go home Angela … No we're good, thank you." He hangs up.

"Everything okay?"

"Yes."

"Is this your Taiwan thing?"

"Yes."

He shifts slightly beneath me.

"Am I too heavy?"

He snorts.

“No, baby.”

“Are you worried about the Taiwan thing?”

“No.”

“I thought it was important.”

“It is. The shipyard here depends on it. There are lots of jobs at stake.”

Oh!

“We just have to sell it the unions. That’s Sam and Kate’s job. But the way the economy’s heading none of us have a lot of choice.”

I yawn.

“Am I boring you, Mrs Cullen?” He nuzzles my hair again, amused.

“No! Never… I’m just very comfortable on your lap. I like hearing about your business.”

“You do?” He sounds surprised.

“Of course.” I lean back to gaze directly at him. “I like hearing any bit of information you deign to share with me,” I smirk.

He regards me with amusement and shakes his head.

“Always hungry for more information, Mrs Cullen.”

“Tell me.” I urge him as I snuggle up against his chest again.

“Tell you what?”

“Why you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Work the way you do.”

“A guy’s got to earn a living.” He’s amused.

"Edward, you earn more than a living."

He frowns and is quiet for a moment. I think he's not going to divulge any secrets. But he surprises me.

"I don't want to be poor," he says, his voice low. "I've done that. I'm not going back there again. Besides… it's a game," he murmurs. "It's about winning. A game I've always found very easy."

"Unlike life," I murmur to myself. Then I realize I said the words out loud.

"Yes, I suppose." He frowns. "Though it's easier with you."

Oh. *Easier with me?* I hug him tightly.

"It can't all be a game." I query. "You're very philanthropic."

He shrugs, and I know he's growing uncomfortable.

"About some things, maybe," he says quietly.

"I love philanthropic Edward," I murmur.

"Just him?"

"Oh, I love megalomaniac Edward too, and control-freak Edward, sexpertise Edward, romantic Edward, shy Edward… the list is endless."

"That's a whole lot of Edwards."

"I'd say at least fifty."

He laughs.

"Fifty Shades," he murmurs into my hair.

"My Fifty Shades."

He shifts, tipping my head back, and kisses me.

"Well Mrs Shades, let's see how your Dad is doing."

"Okay."

~

"Can we go for a drive?"

Edward and I are back in the R8 and I'm feeling giddily buoyant. Charlie's brain is back to normal – all swelling gone. Dr Sluder has decided to wake him from his coma tomorrow. She says she's pleased with his progress.

"Sure." Edward grins at me. "It's your birthday – we can do anything you want."

Oh... his tone makes me turn and gaze at him. His eyes are dark.

"Anything?" I breathe.

"Anything."

How much promise can he load into one word?

"Well, I want to drive."

"Then drive, baby," he grins. I grin back and we head towards I-5.

My car handles like a dream, and as we hit the I-5 I subtly put my foot down, forcing us both back in our seats.

"Steady, baby," Edward warns.

~

As we head back into Portland an idea occurs to me.

"Have you planned lunch?" I ask Edward tentatively.

"No. You're hungry?" He sounds hopeful.

"Yes."

"Where do you want to go? It's your day, Bella."

"I know just the place."

~

I pull up near the gallery where Jake exhibited his work and park right outside the Le Picotin restaurant, where we went after Jake's show. Edward grins at me.

"For one minute I thought you were going to take me to that dreadful bar you drunk dialed me from."

"Why would I do that?"

"To check the azaleas are still alive." He arches a sardonic brow.

I flush.

"Don't remind me! Besides… you still took me to your hotel room." I smirk.

"Best decision I ever made," he says softly, his green eyes warm.

"Yes. It was." I lean over and kiss him.

"Do you think that supercilious fucker is still waiting tables?" Edward asks.

"Supercilious? I thought he was fine."

"He was trying to impress you."

"Well, he succeeded."

Edward's mouth twists in amused disgust.

"Shall we go see?" I offer.

"Lead on, Mrs Cullen."

We climb out of the car.

~

After lunch, and a quick detour to the Heathman to pick up Edward's laptop, we return to the hospital. I spend the afternoon with Charlie, reading aloud from one of the manuscripts I've been sent. My only accompaniment is the sound of the machinery keeping him alive… keeping him with me. Now that I know he's making progress I can breathe a little easier and relax.

I'm hopeful. He just needs time to get well. I've got time – I can give him that. I wonder idly if I should try calling Mom again, but decide to do it later. I hold Charlie's hand

loosely as I read to him, squeezing it occasionally, willing him to be well. His fingers feel soft and warm beneath my touch. He still has the indentation on his finger where he wore his wedding ring – even after all this time.

He looks better, or at least I think he does, though he's taken on a rather unkempt appearance, as he's desperately in need of a shave. I wonder if they'll let me shave him.

When nurse Christie appears I ask her.

"It's not our top priority, Mrs Cullen. It's not something we do."

"Could I do it then? Dad likes to be clean-shaven."

She shakes her head.

"Sorry, ma'am."

I glance up to see Edward standing at the end of Charlie's bed, laptop in hand.

"It's time to go, Bella."

Oh.

"I want to feed you. Come. It's late." Edward sounds insistent.

"I'm about to give Mr Swan a sponge bath," nurse Christie adds.

"Okay," I concede. "We'll be back tomorrow morning."

I bend and kiss Charlie on his cheek, feeling his unfamiliar stubble beneath my lips. I don't like it. *Keep getting better, Daddy. I love you.*

~

"I thought we'd dine downstairs. In a private room," Edward says, a gleam in his eye, as he opens the door to our suite.

"Really? Finish what you started a few months ago?"

He smirks.

"If you're very lucky, Mrs Cullen."

I laugh.

"Edward, I don't have anything dressy to wear."

He smiles, holds out his hand, and leads me into the bedroom. He opens the wardrobe to reveal a large plain white dress bag hanging inside.

"Taylor?" I ask.

"Edward," Edward replies, forceful and wounded at once. His tone makes me laugh. Unzipping the bag I find a navy satin dress and ease it out. Oh, it's gorgeous – fitted, with thin straps. It looks small.

"It's lovely. Thank you. I hope it fits."

"It will," he says confidently. "And here – " Bending down he picks up a shoebox. "Shoes to match." He gives me a wolfish smile.

"You think of everything. Thank you." I stretch up and kiss him.

"I do," he says, and hands me yet another bag. I gaze at him quizzically.

Inside is a black strapless bodysuit, with a central panel of lace. He caresses my face, tilts my chin, and kisses me.

"I look forward to taking this off you later."

~

Fresh out of my bath, washed, shaved and feeling pampered, I sit on the edge of the bed and start up the hair dryer. Edward wanders into the bedroom. I think he's been working.

"Here, let me," he says, pointing to the chair in front of the dressing table.

"Dry my hair?"

He nods. I blink at him.

"Come," he says, regarding me intently. I know that expression, and I know better than to disobey.

Slowly and methodically he dries my hair, one lock at a time. He's obviously done this before… often.

"You're no stranger to this," I murmur.

He smiles, but says nothing, and continues to brush through my hair. Hmm… it's very relaxing.

~

When we step into the elevator on our way to dinner we are unfortunately not alone. Edward looks delicious in his signature white linen shirt, black jeans and jacket. No tie. The two women inside shoot admiring glances at him, and less generous ones at me. I hide my smile. *Yes ladies, he's mine.* Edward takes my hand and pulls me close as we travel in silence down to the mezzanine level.

It's busy, full of people dressed up for the evening, sitting around chatting and drinking, starting their Saturday night. I am grateful that I fit in. The dress hugs me, skimming over my curves and holding everything in place. I have to say, I feel… attractive wearing it. I know Edward approves.

I think at first we're headed for the private dining room where we first discussed the contract, but I'm wrong. He leads me past that doorway and on to the far end, where he opens the door to another wood-paneled room.

"SURPRISE!"

Oh my. Rose, Emmett, Alice and Jasper, Carlisle and Esme – Billy and Jake – my mother and Phil… I stand gaping at them, speechless. *How? When?* I turn in consternation to Edward, and he squeezes my hand.

My Mom steps forward and wraps her arms around me.

Oh Mom!

"Darling, you look beautiful. Happy Birthday."

"Mom!" I sob, embracing her. *Oh Mommy, Mommy, Mommy* – Tears stream down my face, in spite of the audience, and I bury my face in her neck.

"Honey, darling, don't cry. Charlie will be okay. He's such a strong man. Don't cry. Not on your birthday." Her voice cracks, but she maintains her composure. She grasps my face in her hands and with her thumbs wipes away my tears.

"I thought you'd forgotten."

"Oh Bella! How could I? Honey, seventeen hours of labor is not something you easily forget."

I giggle through my tears. She smiles.

"Dry your eyes, darling. Lots of people here to share your special day."

I sniff, not wanting to look at anyone else in the room, embarrassed and thrilled that everyone has made such an effort to come and see me.

"How did you get here? When did you arrive?"

"Your husband sent his plane, darling." She grins, impressed.

And I laugh.

"Thank you, Mom." I smile and she wipes my nose with a tissue – as only a mother would. "Mom!" I scold, composing myself.

"That's better. Happy birthday, darling." She steps aside while everyone lines up to hug me.

"Happy Birthday, Bella!"

"Bella, you look so hot! Happy Birthday."

"Hey Bells. No snot-sobbing on your birthday."

"Bella honey, you sure scrub up lovely on your birthday."

"Bella. Gorgeous dress. D&G right? Oh, and Happy Birthday."

"He's doing well Bella, Dr Sluder is the one of the best in the country. Happy Birthday, darling."

"Happy Birthday Angel." Esme smiles radiantly at me, cupping my face.

"You cry all you want to, Bella – it's your party."

"S'up babe? Your old man will be fine." Emmett enfolds me in his arms. My goodness he's big. "Happy birthday."

"Okay," Taking my hand Edward pulls me from Emmett's embrace. "Enough fondling my wife. Go fondle your own."

Emmett grins wickedly at him, and winks at Rose.

A waiter I hadn't noticed before presents Edward and me with glasses of pink champagne. I realize everyone has a glass. Edward clears his throat.

"This would be a perfect day if my father-in-law were here with us. But he's not far away – he's doing well, and I know he'd like you to enjoy yourself, Bella. To all of you – thank you for coming to share with me my beautiful wife's birthday, the first of many to come. Happy birthday, my love." Edward raises his glass to me amid a chorus of Happy Birthdays, and I have to fight again to keep my tears at bay.

~

I watch the animated conversations around the dinner table. It's strange to be cocooned in the bosom of my family, knowing my father is on a life support machine in the cold clinical environs of the ICU. I feel slightly detached from all the proceedings, but grateful that they're all here. Watching the sparring between Emmett and Edward, Alice's excitement and enthusiasm for everything… Jasper's indulgent and fond regard for her. Jake's ready warm wit. Billy sitting back, like me, enjoying the conversations. He looks better. Rested. Jake is very attentive to him, cutting his food, keeping his glass filled. Having his surviving parent come so close to death has made Jake appreciate Billy more… I know.

I gaze at my Mom. She's in her element, charming, witty and warm – I love her so. I must remember to tell her. Life is so precious. I realize that now.

"You okay?" Rose asks, in an uncharacteristically gentle voice.

I nod, and reach out to clasp her hand.

"Yes. Thanks for coming."

"You think Mr Megabucks could keep me away from you on your birthday? We got to fly in the helicopter!" She grins.

"Really?"

"Yes. All of us. And you say Edward can fly it?"

I nod.

"That's hot."

"Yeah, I think so."

We grin.

"Are you staying here tonight?" I ask.

"Yes. We all are, I think. You knew nothing about this?"

I shake my head.

"Smooth, isn't he?"

I nod.

"What did he get you for your birthday?"

"This." I hold up my bracelet.

"Oh cute!"

"Yes."

"London, Paris… ice cream?"

"You don't want to know."

"I can guess."

We laugh, and I flush, recalling Ben & Jerry's & Bella.

"Oh… and an R8."

Rose spits her wine rather unattractively down her chin, making us both laugh some more.

"Over the top bastard, isn't he?"

"That's what I said."

For dessert I am presented with a sumptuous chocolate cake blazing with 22 silver candles, and a rousing chorus of Happy Birthday. Esme watches Edward singing with the rest of my friends and family, and her eyes shine with love. Catching my eye she blows me a kiss.

"Make a wish," Edward whispers to me.

In one breath I blow out all the candles, fervently willing my father better. *Daddy get well. Please get well. I love you so.*

~

At midnight Billy and Jake leave.

"Thank you so much for coming." I hug Jake tightly.

"Wouldn't miss if for the world, Bells. Glad Charlie's heading in the right direction."

"Yes. You, Billy and Charlie have to come fishing with Edward in Aspen."

"Yeah? Sounds cool," Jake grins. He goes to fetch his father's coat, and I crouch down to say goodbye to Billy.

"You know Bella, there was a time… well, I thought you and Jake…" His voice fades, and he gazes at me, his dark gaze intense but loving.

Oh no.

"I know, Billy. I love Jake, but… he's like a brother."

"You would have made one fine daughter-in-law. And you do. To the Cullens." He smiles wistfully and I flush.

"I hope you'll settle for friend."

"Of course. Your husband is a fine man. You chose well, Bella."

I flush some more.

"I think so," I whisper. "I love him so." I reach up and hug Billy.

"Treat him good, Bella."

"I will," I promise.

~

Edward closes the door to our suite.

"Alone at last," he murmurs, leaning back against the door, watching me. I step towards him and run my fingers over the lapels of his jacket.

"Thank you for a wonderful birthday. You really are the most thoughtful, considerate, generous husband…"

"My pleasure," he says.

"Yes… your pleasure. Let's do something about that," I whisper. Tightening my hands around his lapels I pull his lips to mine.

~o~

When I wake I'm wrapped around my husband. He's awake too, tousled, green-eyed and beautiful.

"Good morning, Mrs Cullen."

"Mr Cullen, good morning. I trust you slept well?"

"I did, thank you. Very pleasant dreams." He smiles suggestively.

"Any you want to tell me about?"

"I think I'd rather show you."

I giggle, but I'm soon lost in his spell once more.

~

After a communal breakfast when I open all my presents and a series of cheery goodbyes to all the Cullens, My Mom, Edward and I head up to the hospital – Taylor driving, since the three of us would not fit into my R8. Phil has declined to visit, and I'm secretly glad. It'd be just too weird… and I'm sure Charlie wouldn't appreciate Phil seeing him at anything less than his best.

Charlie looks much the same. Hairier. Mom is shocked when she sees him, and together we cry a little more.

"Oh Charlie…" She squeezes his hand and gently strokes his face, and I'm moved to see her love for her ex-husband. I'm glad I have tissues in my purse. We sit beside him, me holding her hand while she holds his.

"Bella, there was a time when this man was the center of my world. The sun rose and set around him. I'll always love him. He gave me you."

"Mom," I choke. She strokes my face and tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear.

"You know I'll always love your father. I just couldn't live with him."

"I know." I dry my eyes. "They are going to bring him out of his coma today."

"Good. I'm sure he'll be fine. He's so stubborn. Like you."

I smile.

"Have you been talking to Edward?"

"Does he think you're stubborn?"

"I believe so."

"I'll tell him it's a family trait. You look so good together, Bella. So happy."

"We are, I think. Getting there, anyway. I love him. He's the center of my world. The sun rises and sets with him, for me too."

"He obviously adores you, darling."

"And I adore him."

"Make sure you tell him. Men need to hear that stuff, just like we do."

~

I insist on going to the airport with Phil and my Mom to say goodbye. Taylor follows in the R8 and Edward drives the SUV. I'm sorry they can't stay longer, but they have to get back to Jacksonville. It's a tearful goodbye.

"Take good care of her, Phil," I whisper as he hugs me.

"Sure will, Bella. And you look after yourself."

"Will do." I turn to my mother. "Goodbye, Mom. Thank you for coming," I whisper, my voice hoarse. "I love you so much."

"Oh my darling girl, I love you too. And your Dad will be fine. He's not ready to shuffle of his mortal coil just yet. There's probably a Mariners game he couldn't miss."

I giggle. She's right. I resolve to read the sports pages of the Sunday newspaper to Charlie that evening.

I watch her and Phil climb the steps into the Cullen Enterprises Holdings jet. She gives me a tearful wave, then she's gone.

Edward wraps his arm around my shoulder.

"Let's head back, baby," he breathes.

"Will you drive?"

"Sure."

~

When we return to the hospital that evening Charlie looks different. It takes me a moment to realize that the suck and push of the ventilator has vanished. Charlie is breathing on his own. *Oh my goodness. Go Daddy!* I stroke his stubbly face, and taking out a tissue gently wipe his mouth.

Daddy.

Edward stalks off to find Dr Sluder or Dr Crow for an update, while I take my familiar seat beside his bed, to keep a watchful vigil.

I unfold the sports section of the Sunday Oregonian and conscientiously begin reading out the report from the Mariners game against the Texas Rangers. By all accounts it was an exciting match, thanks to a Japanese player called Suzuki. I hold Charlie's hand firmly in mine as I read it through.

"And the final score – Mariners 8, Rangers 3."

"Hey Bells, we won?" Charlie rasps. And he squeezes my hand.

Oh Daddy, Daddy, Daddy –

Chapter 110/23

Tears stream down my face. He's back, my Daddy is back.

"Don't cry, Bells," Charlie's voice is hoarse. "What's happening?"

I take up his hand in both of mine and cradle it against my face.

"You've been in an accident. You're in the hospital in Portland."

Charlie frowns, and I don't know if it's because he's uncomfortable with my uncharacteristic display of affection, or that he can't remember the accident.

"Do you want some water?" I ask, not sure if I am allowed to give him any.

He nods, bewildered.

Oh Daddy. My heart swells.

I stand up and lean over him, kissing his forehead.

"I love you, Daddy. Welcome back."

He waves his hand, embarrassed.

"Me too, Bells. Water."

I run the short distance to the nurses' station.

"My Dad – he's awake!" I beam at Nurse Christie, who beams back at me.

"Page Dr Sluder," she says to her colleague, and hurriedly makes her way round the desk.

"He wants water."

"I'll bring him some."

I practically skip back to my father's bed, I feel so light-hearted. His eyes are closed when I reach him, and I immediately worry that he's slipped back into a coma.

"Daddy?"

"I'm here," he mutters.

Nurse Christie appears with a jug of ice chips and a glass.

"Hello, Mr Swan. I'm Nurse Christie. Your daughter tells me you're thirsty."

~

In the waiting room Edward is staring fixedly at his laptop, deep in concentration. He glances up when I close the door, and his eyes widen.

"He's awake," I announce.

He smiles, and the tension around his eyes vanishes. Oh… I hadn't noticed before. Has he been tense for long? He sets his laptop aside, stands and embraces me.

"How is he?" he asks into my hair.

"Talking, thirsty, bewildered. He doesn't remember the accident at all." It is so comfortable in this man's arms. I wrap my arms around him.

"That's understandable. Now that he's awake I want to get him moved to Seattle. Then we can go home, and *my* dad can keep an eye on your dad."

Oh.

"I'm not sure he's well enough to be moved."

"I'll talk to Dr Sluder. Get her opinion."

"You miss home?"

"Yes."

"Okay."

~o~

"You haven't stopped smiling," Edward says as I pull up outside the Heathman.

"I'm very relieved. And happy."

Edward grins.

"Good."

The light is fading, and I shiver as I step out into the cool, crisp evening, handing my key to the parking valet. He's eyeing my car with lust, and frankly I don't blame him. Edward puts his arm around me.

"Shall we celebrate?" he asks as we enter the foyer.

"Celebrate?"

"Your Dad."

I giggle.

"Oh, him."

"I've missed that sound," Edward breathes, and kisses my hair.

"Can we just eat in our room? You know, have a quiet night in?"

"Sure. Come." Taking my hand he leads me to the elevators.

~

"That was delicious," I murmur with satisfaction as I push my plate away, replete. "They sure know how to make a fine Tarte Tatin here." I am freshly bathed, and wearing only Edward's t-shirt and my panties. In the background Edward's iPod is on shuffle, and Dido is warbling on about white flags.

Edward eyes me speculatively. His hair is still damp from our bath, and he's wearing just his black t-shirt and jeans.

"That's the most I've seen you eat the entire time we've been here," he says.

"I was hungry."

He leans back in his chair with a self-satisfied smirk and takes a sip of his white wine.

"What would you like to do now?" His voice is soft.

"What do you want to do?"

He raises an eyebrow, amused.

"What I always want to do."

"And that is?"

"Mrs Cullen, don't be coy."

Reaching across the dining table I grasp his hand, turn it over and skim my index finger over his palm.

"I'd like you to touch me with this." I run my finger up his index finger. He shifts in his chair.

"Just that?" he breathes, his eyes darkening and heating at once.

"Maybe this?" I run my finger up his middle finger and back to his palm. "And this…" My nail traces his ring finger. "Definitely this." My finger stops at his wedding ring. "This is very sexy."

"Is it now?"

"It sure is. It says 'this man is mine.'" And I softly skim the small callous that has already formed on his palm beneath the ring. He leans forward and cups my chin with his other hand.

"Mrs Cullen, are you seducing me?"

"I hope so."

"Isabella, I'm a given." His voice is low. "Come here." He tugs my hand so that I rise from my seat, then fall into his lap.

"I like having unfettered access to you," he whispers, as he runs a hand up my thigh to my behind. His other hand grasps the nape of my neck and he kisses me, holding me firmly in place. He tastes of white wine and apple pie and Edward. I run my fingers through his hair, holding him to me while our tongues explore and curl and twist around each other, my blood heating in my veins. We're breathless when Edward pulls away.

"Let's go to bed," he murmurs against my lips.

"Bed?"

He pulls back further and tugs my hair so I am looking up at him.

"Where would you prefer, Mrs Cullen?"

My inner goddess stops stuffing her face with Tarte Tatin.

I shrug, feigning indifference.

“Surprise me.”

He smirks.

“You’re feisty this evening.” He runs his nose along mine.

“Maybe I need to be restrained.”

“Maybe you do. You’re getting mighty bossy in your old age.” He narrows his eyes at me, but can’t disguise the latent humor there.

“What are you going to do about it?” I challenge.

His eyes glitter.

“I know what I’d like to do about it. Depends if you’re up to it,” he murmurs.

“Oh Mr Cullen, you’ve been very gentle with me these last couple of days,” I breathe.

“You don’t like gentle?”

“With you, of course. But you know… Variety is the spice of life.” I bat my lashes at him.

“You’re after something less gentle?”

“Something life-affirming.”

He raises his brows in surprise.

“Life-affirming,” he repeats, and I hear the astonished humor in his voice.

I nod. He gazes at me for a moment.

“Don’t bite your lip,” he whispers, and rises suddenly with me in his arms. I gasp and grab his biceps, fearful that he’ll drop me. He walks over to the smallest of the three couches and drops me on to it, gazing down at me.

“Wait here. Don’t move,” he orders, green eyes hot and intense. He turns on his heel and stalks towards the bedroom. Oh… Edward, barefoot. Why are his feet so hot? He’s back a few moments later, taking me by surprise as he leans over me, from behind.

"I think we'll dispense with this." Grabbing the hem of my t-shirt he pulls it over my head, leaving me naked except for my panties. He pulls my ponytail back and kisses me.

"Stand up," he orders against my lips, and releases me. I comply immediately.

He lays a towel out on the sofa.

Towel?

"Take your panties off."

Oh. I swallow, but do as I'm told, discarding them by the sofa.

"Sit." He grabs my ponytail again and pulls my head back. "You'll tell me to stop if this gets too much, yes?"

I nod.

"Say it."

"Yes."

"So, Mrs Cullen… by popular demand, I'm going to restrain you," he whispers.

Desire streaks through my body like lightning, simply at those words. Oh my sweet Fifty – on the sofa? What are you going to do?

"Bring your knees up," he commands softly. "And sit right back."

I rest my feet on the edge of the sofa, my knees up in front of me. He reaches for my left leg, and taking the belt from one of the bathroom robes, ties one end above my knee.

"Bathrobes?"

He smirks.

"I'm improvising." He fastens the slipknot above my knee and ties the other end of the soft belt round the finial at the back corner of the sofa, effectively parting my legs.

"Don't move," he warns. Deliberately He repeats the process with my right leg, tying the second cord to the other finial.

Oh my… I am sitting up, splayed out on the sofa, legs spread wide.

"Okay?" Edward asks softly, gazing down at me from behind the sofa.

I nod, expecting him to tie my hands too. But he refrains. He bends and kisses me.

"You have no idea how hot you look right now," he breathes and he rubs his nose against mine. "Change of music I think." He stands and strolls, casually and unhurriedly, over to the iPod dock.

How does he do this? Here I am, trussed up and horny as hell, while he's so cool and calm. He's just in my field of vision, and I watch the flex and pull of the muscles in his back under his t-shirt as he reaches down and changes the song. Immediately a sweet, almost childlike, female voice starts to sing.

Ooh watching me,
Hanging by
A string this time

Oh, I like this song.

Edward turns and gazes at me, his eyes locked on mine as he moves round to the front of the sofa and sinks gracefully to his knees in front of me.

Suddenly, I feel very exposed.

"Exposed? Vulnerable?" he asks, with his uncanny ability to voice my unspoken words. His hands are on his knees.

I nod. Why doesn't he touch me?

"Good," he murmurs. "Hold out your hands." I can't look away from his mesmerizing green eyes. I hold my hands out, palms up. Edward produces a small bottle of clear liquid, unscrews the lid and pours a little into each palm. It's scented oil… a rich, musky, sensuous scent that I can't place.

"Rub your hands," he bids, and I squirm beneath his hot, heavy gaze.

"Keep still," he warns, narrowing his eyes.

Oh my.

"Now, Isabella, I want you to touch yourself."

Holy cow.

"Start at your throat, and work down."

Oh… I hesitate.

"Don't be shy Bella. Come. Do it."

I can see the humor and the challenge in his expression, and also the desire.

Sweet about me
Nothing sweet
About me yeah

I place my hands against my throat and let them slide down to the top of my breasts. The oil makes them glide effortlessly over my skin. My hands are warm.

"Lower," Edward murmurs, his eyes darkening. He doesn't touch me.

My hands cup my breasts.

"Tease yourself."

Oh my. I tug gently on my nipples.

"Harder," Edward breathes. He sits immobile between my thighs, just watching me.

"Like I would." His eyes shine darkly.

My muscles clench deep in my belly. I groan in response and pull harder on my nipples, feeling them lengthen and stiffen beneath my touch.

"Yes. Like that. Again."

I close my eyes and pull hard, rolling and twisting them between my fingers. I moan.

"Open your eyes."

I blink up at him.

"Again," he whispers. "I want to see you. See you enjoy your touch."

Oh fuck. I repeat the process. This is so… erotic.

"Hands. Lower."

Sweet about me
Nothing sweet
About me yeah

I squirm.

"Keep still Bella. Absorb the pleasure. Lower." His voice is low and husky, tempting and beguiling at once.

"You do it," I whisper.

"Oh, I will. Soon. You do it. Lower. Now." He runs his tongue along his teeth, oozing sensuality. Holy fuck… I writhe, pulling on the restraints.

He shakes his head, slowly, from side to side.

"Still," he warns, and rests his hands on my knees, holding me in place.

"Come on, Bella – lower," he coaxes.

My hands glide over stomach down over my belly.

"Lower," he mouths, and he is carnality personified.

Shit… he's so hot.

"Edward, please."

His hands glide down from my knees, skimming my thighs, towards my sex.

"Come on, Bella. Touch yourself."

My left hand skims over my sex and I rub in a slow circle, my mouth an O as I pant.

"Again," he whispers.

I groan louder and repeat the move, and tip my head back, gasping.

"Again," he urges.

I moan loudly, and Edward inhales sharply. Grabbing my hands he bends down, running his nose then his tongue back and forth at the apex of my thighs.

"Ah!"

I want to touch him, but when I try to move my hands his fingers tighten around my wrists.

"I'll restrain these too. Keep still."

I groan. He releases me, then eases his middle two fingers inside me, the heel of his hand resting against my clitoris.

"I'm going to make you come quickly, Bella. Ready?"

"Yes," I pant.

He starts to move his fingers, his hand, up and down, rapidly, assaulting both that sweet spot inside me and my clitoris at the same time. Ah! *HOLY FUCK!*

The feeling is intense – really intense. Pleasure builds and spikes throughout the lower half of my body. I want to stretch my legs, but I can't. My hands claw at the towel beneath me.

"Surrender," Edward whispers.

I explode around his fingers, crying out incoherently. He presses the heel of his hand against my clitoris as the aftershocks run through my body, prolonging the delicious agony.

Vaguely I'm aware that he's untying my legs.

"My turn," he murmurs, and flips me over so I am face down on the sofa with my knees on the floor. He spreads my legs and slaps me hard across my behind.

"Ah!" And in one swift move with no preamble whatsoever he's inside me.

"Oh Bella," he hisses through clenched teeth, as he starts to move. His fingers grip me hard around my hips as he grinds into me, over and over. And I'm building again… no… ah…

"Come on, Bella," Edward shouts, and I shatter once more, pulsing around him and crying out as I come.

Sweet about me
Nothing sweet
About me yeah

"Life-affirming enough for you?" Edward kisses my hair.

"Oh, yes," I murmur, gazing up at the ceiling. I am lying on my husband, my back to his front, both of us on the floor beside the sofa. He's still dressed.

"I think we should go again. No clothes for you this time."

"Christ, Bella. Give a man a chance."

I giggle, and he chuckles.

"I'm glad Charlie's conscious. Seems all your appetites are back," he says, and I hear the smile in his voice. I turn over and scowl at him.

"Are you forgetting about last night and this morning?" I pout.

"Nothing forgettable about either of those," he grins. He looks so young and carefree and happy. He cups my behind. "You have a fantastic ass, Mrs Cullen."

"So do you." I arch a brow at him. "Though yours is still under cover."

"And what are you going to do about that, Mrs Cullen?"

"Why, I'm going to undress you, Mr Cullen. All of you."

He grins.

"And I think there's a lot that's sweet about you," I murmur, referring to the song still playing on repeat.

His smile fades.

Oh no.

"You are," I whisper. I lean down and kiss the corner of his mouth. He closes his eyes and tightens his arms around me.

"Edward, you are. You made this weekend so special – in spite of what happened to Charlie. Thank you."

He blinks at me with large serious green eyes that tug at my heart.

"Because I love you," he murmurs.

"I know. I love you too." I reach up and caress his face. "And you're precious to me too. You do know that, don't you?"

His eyes widen and he looks lost.

Oh Edward… My sweet Fifty.

"Believe me," I whisper.

"It's not easy." His voice is almost inaudible.

"Try. Try hard, because it's true." I stroke his face once more, my fingers brushing against his sideburns.

He gazes at me, his eyes still wide, green oceans of loss and hurt and pain. I want to climb into his body and hold him. Anything to stop that look. When will he realize that he means the world to me? That he's more than worthy of my love, his parents' love – his siblings'? I have told him so over and over – and yet… here we are – his lost, abandoned look. Time. It will just take time.

"You'll get cold. Come," he says shifting. He rises gracefully to his feet, and pulls me up to stand beside him. I slip my arm around his waist as we wander back into the bedroom. I won't push him, but since Charlie's accident it's become more important to me that he knows, knows how much I love him.

As we enter the bedroom I frown, desperate to recover the very welcome lighthearted mood of only a few moments ago.

"Shall we watch TV?" I ask.

Edward snorts.

"I was rather hoping for round two." And my mercurial Fifty is back.

I arch my brow and stop by the bed.

"Well, in that case – I think I'll be in charge."

He gapes at me. I push him on to the bed and quickly straddle him, pinning his hands down beside his head. He grins up at me.

"Well, Mrs Cullen, now you've got me. What are you going to do with me?"

I lean down and whisper in his ear.

"I am going to fuck you with my mouth."

He closes his eyes, inhaling sharply, and I run my teeth gently along his jaw.

~o~

Edward is working at the computer. It's a bright early morning and he's tapping out an email, I think.

"Good morning," I murmur shyly from the doorway.

He turns and beams at me.

"Mrs Cullen. You're up early." He holds open his arms. I make my way across the suite and curl into his lap.

"As are you."

"I was just working." He shifts as he kisses my hair.

"What?" I ask, sensing something wrong.

He sighs.

"I got an email from Detective Clark. He wants to talk to you about that fucker Smith."

"Really?" I sit back to gaze at Edward.

"Yes. I told him you're in Portland for the time being so he'll have to wait. But he says he'd like to interview you here."

"He's coming here?"

"Apparently so." Edward looks bemused.

I frown.

"What's so important that can't wait?"

"Exactly."

"When's he coming?"

"Today, I think. I'll email him back."

"I have nothing to hide. I wonder what he wants to know?"

"We'll find out when he gets here. I'm as intrigued as you."

Edward shifts again.

“Breakfast will be here shortly. Let’s eat, then we can go and see your dad.”

I nod.

“You can stay here if you want. I can see you’re busy.”

“No,” he scowls at me. “I want to come with you.”

“Okay.” I grin, and wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

~o~

Charlie is bad-tempered. It’s a joy. He’s itchy and scratchy and impatient and uncomfortable.

“Dad, you’ve been in a major car accident. It will take time to heal. Edward and I want to move you to Seattle.”

“I don’t know why you’re bothering with me. I’ll be fine here on my own.”

“Dad, don’t be ridiculous.” I squeeze his hand fondly and he has the grace to smile at me.

“Do you need anything?”

“I could murder a doughnut, Bells.”

I grin indulgently at him.

“I’ll get you a doughnut or two. Krispy Kreme or Dunkin Donuts?”

“Either.”

“Decent coffee?”

“Hell yeah!”

“Okay, I’ll go get some.”

~

Edward is once more in the waiting room, talking on the phone. He really should set up office in here. Weirdly he's on his own, although the other ICU beds are occupied. Briefly I wonder if Edward's frightened off the other visitors. He hangs up.

"Clark will be here at four this afternoon."

I frown. What could be so urgent?

"Okay. Charlie wants coffee and doughnuts – could he be any more of a cliché?"

Edward laughs.

"Ask Taylor to go."

"No, I'll go."

"Take Taylor with you." His voice is stern.

"Okay." I roll my eyes at him, and he narrows his eyes at me. Then smirks, and cocks his head to one side.

"There's no one here," he says, his voice deliciously low, and I know he's threatening to spank me. I am about to dare him, when a young couple enters the room. She is weeping softly.

Oh no.

I shrug apologetically at Edward, and he nods. Picking up his laptop he takes my hand and leads me out of the room. "They need privacy more than we do," Edward murmurs. "We'll have our fun later."

Outside Taylor is waiting patiently. "Let's all go get coffee and doughnuts."

~o~

At 4pm precisely there's a knock on the suite door. Taylor ushers in Detective Clark, who looks bad-tempered. He always seems to look bad-tempered – perhaps it's the way his face is set.

"Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen, thank you for seeing me."

"Detective Clark." Edward shakes his hand and directs him to a seat. I sit down on the sofa where I enjoyed myself so much last night. The thought makes me flush.

"It's Mrs Cullen I wish to see," Clark says pointedly at Edward, and at Taylor, stationed beside the door. Taylor glances at Edward. Edward nods slightly, and Taylor abruptly leaves, shutting the door behind him.

"Anything you wish to say to my wife you can say in front of me." Edward's voice is cool and business-like. Detective Clark turns to me.

"Are you sure you're happy for your husband to be present?"

I frown at him.

"Of course. I have nothing to hide. You are just interviewing me?" I clarify.

"Yes ma'am."

"I'd like my husband to stay."

Edward sits beside me, and I can tell he's tense.

"As you wish," murmurs Detective Clark, resigned. He clears his throat.

"Mrs Cullen, Mr Smith maintains that you sexually harassed him and made several lewd advances to him."

Oh! I almost burst out laughing, but put my hand out to restrain Edward as he shifts forward in his seat.

"That's preposterous," Edward splutters.

I squeeze Edward's wrist to silence him.

"That's not true." I state calmly and matter-of-factly to Clark. "In fact it was the other way round. He propositioned me in a very aggressive manner, and he was fired."

Detective Clark mouth flattens briefly into a thin line before he continues.

"Smith alleges that you fabricated a tale about sexual harassment in order to get him fired. He says that you did this because he refused your advances, and because you wanted his job."

I frown. Holy crap – James is even more delusional than I thought.

"That's not true." I shake my head.

“Detective, please don’t tell me you have driven all this way to harass my wife with these ridiculous accusations.”

Detective Clark turns his steely blue glare on Edward.

“I need to hear this from Mrs Cullen, sir,” he says with quiet force. I squeeze Edward’s wrist once more, silently imploring him to keep his cool.

“You don’t have to listen to this shit, Bella.”

“I think I should let Detective Clark know what happened.”

Edward gazes at me impassively for a beat, then waves his hand in a gesture of defeat, letting me continue.

“What Smith says is simply not true.” My voice sounds calm, although I feel anything but. I’m bewildered by these accusations, and nervous that Edward might explode. What is James’s game?

“James Smith accosted me in the office kitchen one evening. He told me that it was thanks to him that I had been hired, and that he expected sexual favors in return. He tried to blackmail me, using emails that I’d sent to Edward, who wasn’t my husband then. I didn’t know Smith had been monitoring my emails. Smith’s delusional – he even accused me of being a spy sent by Edward, presumably to help him take over the company. He didn’t know that Edward had already bought SIP. ” I shake my head as I recall my weird, tense encounter with Smith.

“In the end I – I took him down.”

Clark’s eyebrows rise in surprise.

“Took him down?”

“I’m a cop’s daughter. He, um, touched me, and I know how to defend myself.”

Edward glances at me with a brief look of pride.

“I see.” Clark says, and leans back on the sofa sighing heavily.

“Have you spoken to any of Smith’s former PAs?” Edward asks, almost genially.

“Yes, we have. But the truth is, we can’t get any of his assistants to talk to us. They all say he was an exemplary boss, even though none of them lasted more than three months.”

"We've had that problem too," Edward murmurs.

Oh? I gape at Edward.

Detective Clark looks quizzically at Edward.

"My security chief. He's interviewed Smith's past five PAs."

"And why's that?"

Edward gives him a steely glare.

"Because my wife worked for him, and I run security checks on anyone my wife works with."

Detective Clark flushes. I shrug apologetically and give him a welcome-to-my-world smile.

"I see," Clark murmurs. "I think there's more to this than meets the eye, Mr Cullen. We are conducting a more thorough search of his apartment tomorrow, so maybe something will present itself then. Though by all accounts he hasn't lived there for some time."

"You've searched already?"

"Yes. We're doing it again. A fingertip search this time."

"You've still not charged him with the attempted murder of Kate Massey and myself?" Edward says softly.

What?

"We're hoping to find more evidence in regard to the sabotage of your aircraft, Mr Cullen. We need more than a partial print, and while he's in custody we can build a case."

"Is this all you came down here for?"

Clark bristles.

"Yes, Mr Cullen it is."

"I don't see why we couldn't have done this over the phone."

"I prefer a hands-on approach. And, I'm visiting my great-aunt who lives here in Portland."

Oh!

“Well, if we’re all done, I have work to attend to.” Edward stands and Detective Clark follows his cue.

“Thank you for your time, Mrs Cullen,” he says politely to me.

I nod.

“Mr Cullen.”

Edward opens the door and Detective Clark leaves.

I sag into the sofa.

“Can you believe that asshole?”

“Clark?”

“No. That fucker, Smith.”

“No, I can’t.”

“What’s his fucking game?” Edward frowns thoughtfully.

“I don’t know. Do you think Clark believed me?”

“Of course he did. He knows Smith is a fucked-up asshole.”

“You’re very sweary.”

“Sweary?” Edward smirks. “Is that a word?”

“It is now.”

He grins and sits down beside me, pulling me into his arms.

“Don’t think about that fucker. Let’s go see your Dad and try and talk about the move tomorrow.”

“He was adamant that he wanted to stay in Portland and not be a bother.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

"I want to travel with him," I murmur.

Edward gazes at me, and for a moment I think he's going to say no.

"Okay. I'll come too. Stuart and Taylor can take the cars. I'll let Stuart drive your R8 tonight."

~oOo~

The following day Charlie is examining his new surroundings – an airy, light, room in the rehabilitation centre of the Northwest Hospital in Seattle. It's noon, and he looks sleepy. I think the journey has tired him.

"Tell Edward I appreciate this," he says quietly.

"You can tell him yourself. He'll be along this evening."

"Aren't you going to go to work?"

"Probably. I just want to make sure you're settled in here."

"You get along. You don't need to worry about me."

"I like worrying about you."

My BlackBerry buzzes. I check the number – it's not one I recognize.

"You going to answer that?" Charlie asks.

"No. I don't know who it is. The voice mail can take it for me. I bought you some magazines." I indicate the pile of sporting periodicals on his bedside table.

"Thanks, Bells."

"You're tired, aren't you?"

He nods.

"I'll let you get some sleep." I lean over and kiss his forehead. "Laters, Daddy," I murmur.

"I'll see you later, honey. And thank you." Charlie reaches out and catches my hand, squeezing it gently.

Oh Daddy. I return his squeeze and turn to leave.

~

As I head out of the main doors towards the SUV where Stuart is waiting, I hear my name being called.

"Mrs Cullen! Mrs Cullen!"

Turning I see Dr Greene hurry towards me, looking her usual immaculate self, if a little flustered.

"Mrs Cullen, how are you? Did you get my message? I called earlier."

"No, Dr Greene." My scalp prickles.

"Well, I was wondering why you'd cancelled four appointments."

Four appointments? I gape at her. *I've missed four appointments! How?*

"Perhaps we should talk about this in my office. I was just off for lunch – do you have time right now?"

I nod meekly.

"Sure. I…" Words fail me. I've missed four appointments? *I'm late for my shot.* Shit.

I follow her in a daze back into the hospital and up to her office. How did I miss four appointments? I vaguely remember one being moved – Hanna mentioned it – but *four?* How could I miss four?

Dr Greene's office is spacious, minimalist, and well appointed.

"I'm so grateful you caught me before I left," I mumble, still she**ll-shocked. "My father's been in a car accident, and we've just moved him here from Portland."

"Oh I'm so sorry. How's he doing?"

"He's doing okay, thank you. On the mend."

"That's good. And it explains why you cancelled yesterday."

Dr Greene wiggles the mouse on her desk and her computer comes to life.

"Yes… it's been over thirteen weeks. You're cutting it a bit fine. We'd better do a test before we give you another shot."

"A test?" I whisper, all the blood rushing from my head.

"A pregnancy test."

Oh no. She reaches into the drawer of her desk.

"You know what to do with this." She hands me a small container. "The restroom is just outside my office."

I get up as if in a trance, my whole body robotic, operating on automatic pilot, and make my way to the restroom.

Shit, shit, shit, shit, *shit.* How could I have let this happen… again? I suddenly feel sick, and offer a silent prayer while I pee. *Please no. Please no. It's too soon. It's too soon. It's too soon.*

When I re-enter Dr Greene's office she gives me a tight smile and waves me to the seat in front of her desk. I sit down and wordlessly hand her my sample. She dips a small white stick into it and watches. She raises her eyebrows as it turns pale blue.

"What does that mean? The blue?" The tension is almost choking me.

She looks up at me, her eyes wide.

"Well, Mrs Cullen, it means you're pregnant."

What? No. No. No.

Fuck.

Chapter 111/24

I gape at Dr Greene, my world collapsing around me. A baby. *A baby.* I don't want a baby… yet. *Fuck.* Deep down I know Edward is going to freak.

"Mrs Cullen, you're very pale. Would you like a glass of water?"

"Please." My voice is a whisper. My mind is racing. Pregnant? When?

"I take it you're surprised."

I nod mutely at the good Doctor as she hands me a glass of water from her conveniently placed water-cooler. I take a welcome sip.

"Shocked." My voice is barely audible.

"We could do an ultrasound to see how advanced the pregnancy is. Judging by your reaction, I suspect you're just a week or so from conception. I take it you haven't been suffering any other symptoms?"

I shake my head mutely. *Symptoms?* I don't think so.

"I thought… I thought this was a reliable form of contraceptive," I whisper.

Dr Greene arches a brow.

"It normally is, when you remember to have the shot," she says coolly.

I flush.

"I must have lost track of time." *Edward is going to freak.* I know it.

"Have you been bleeding at all?"

I frown.

"No."

"That's normal for the Depo. Shall we have a look at you? I have time."

I nod, bewildered, and Dr Greene directs me towards a black leather couch behind a screen.

"If you'll just slip off your skirt and panties, we'll go from there," she says briskly.

Panties? I was expecting an ultrasound-scan over my belly. Why do I need to remove my panties? I shrug in consternation, then quickly do as she says and lie down beneath the soft white blanket.

"That's good." Dr Greene appears at the end of the couch, pulling the ultra-sound machine closer. It's a hi-tech stack of computers. Sitting down she positions the screen so that we can both see it and jogs the trackball on the keyboard. The screen pings into life.

"If you could lift and bend your knees, then part them wide," she says matter-of-factly. *What?* I blink at her, confused.

"This is a transvaginal ultrasound. If you're only just pregnant, we should be able to find the baby with this." She holds up a long white probe. *Oh – you have got to be kidding!*

"Okay," I mutter, mortified, and do as she says. Greene pulls a condom over the wand and lubricates it with clear gel.

"Right, Mrs Cullen, if you could relax," she murmurs.

Relax? I'm pregnant, damn it! How do you expect me to relax? I flush, and endeavor to find my happy place… which is somewhere near the lost city of Eldorado. Slowly and gently she inserts the probe. Holy Fuck.

All I can see on the screen is the visual equivalent of white noise – although it's more sepia in color. Slowly Dr Greene moves the probe about, and it's very disconcerting.

"There," she murmurs. She presses a button, freezing the picture on the screen, and points to a tiny blip in the sepia storm. *It's a little blip.* Oh my. There's a tiny little blip in my belly. Tiny. *Wow.* I forget my discomfort as I stare shellshocked at the blip.

"It's too early to see the heartbeat, but yes, you're definitely pregnant. Four or five weeks, I would say."

I am too stunned to say anything. The little blip is a baby. A real honest to goodness baby. Edward's baby. My baby. Holy cow. *A baby.*

"Would you like me to print out a picture for you?"

I nod, still unable to speak, and Dr Greene presses a button. Then she gently removes the wand and hands me a paper towel to clean myself.

"Congratulations, Mrs Cullen," she says as I sit up. "We'll need to make another appointment, I suggest in four weeks' time. Then we can ascertain the exact age of your baby and set a likely due date. You can get dressed now."

"Okay," I mutter, reeling. I have a blip, a little blip. Hurriedly I dress.

When I emerge from behind the screen Dr Greene is back at her desk.

"In the meantime I'd like you to start this course of folic acid and multivitamins. Here's a leaflet of do's and don'ts." As she hands me a package of pills and a leaflet she continues to talk at me, but I'm not listening. I'm in shock. Overwhelmed. Surely I should be happy. Surely I should be thirty… at least. This is too soon – far too soon. I try to quell my rising sense of panic.

Wishing Dr Greene a polite goodbye I head in a daze back down to the exit and out of into the cool Fall afternoon. I'm gripped suddenly by a creeping cold and deep sense of foreboding. Edward is going to freak, I know, but how much and how far, I have no idea. His words haunt me: *'I'm not ready to share you yet.'*

I pull my jacket tighter around me, trying to shake off the cold.

Stuart leaps out of the SUV and holds open the door. He frowns when he sees my face, but I ignore his concerned expression.

"Where to, Mrs Cullen?" he asks gently.

"SIP."

I nestle into the back of the car, closing my eyes and resting my head on the back seat. I should be happy. I know I should be happy. But I'm not. This is too early. What about my job? What about SIP? What about Edward and me? No. No. *No.* We'll be fine. He'll be fine. He loved baby Alice – I remember Carlisle telling me – he dotes on her now. Perhaps I should warn Banner… Perhaps I shouldn't tell Edward. Perhaps I… perhaps I should end this. I halt my thoughts on that dark path, alarmed at the direction they're taking. Instinctively my hand sweeps down to rest protectively over my belly. *No. My little Blip.* Tears spring to my eyes. What am I going to do?

A vision of a little boy with copper-colored hair and bright green eyes running through the meadow at the new house invades my thoughts, teasing and tantalizing me with possibilities. He's giggling and squealing with delight as Edward and I chase him. Edward swings him high in his arms and carries him on his hip as we walk hand in hand back to the house.

My vision morphs into Edward turning away from me in disgust. I am fat and awkward, heavy with child. He paces the long hall of mirrors, away from me, the sound of his footsteps echoing off the silvered glass, walls and floor. *Edward…*

I jerk awake. *No.* He's going to freak out.

When Stuart pulls up outside SIP I leap out and head into the building.

"Bella, great to see you. How's your Dad?" Hanna asks as soon as I reach my office.

I regard her coolly.

"He's better, thank you. Can I see you in my office?"

She blinks at me, surprised.

"Sure." She follows me in. "Is everything okay?"

"I need to know if you've moved or cancelled any appointments with Dr Greene."

"Dr Greene? Yes, I have. About three or four of them. Mostly because you were in other meetings, or over-running. Why?"

BECAUSE NOW I'M FUCKING PREGNANT! I scream at her in my head. I take a deep steadying breath.

"If you move any appointments can you make sure I know? I don't always check my calendar."

"Sure," Hanna says quietly. "I'm sorry. Have I done something wrong?"

I shake my head and sigh loudly.

"Can you make me some tea? Then let's discuss what's been happening while I've been away."

"Sure. I'll jump to it." Brightening she heads out of the office.

I gaze after her departing figure.

"You see that woman?" I talk quietly to the Blip. "She's responsible for you." I pat my belly, then feel like a complete idiot, because I am talking to my Blip. My tiny little Blip. I shake my head, exasperated at myself and at Hanna, and switch on my computer. There's an email from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 15 September 2009: 13.58
To: Isabella Cullen

Mrs Cullen
I've been back in the office for only 3 hours and I am missing you already.
Hope Charlie has settled in okay at the Northwest. Carlisle is going to see him this afternoon and check up on him.
I'll collect you around 6.00 this evening and we can go and see him before heading home.
Sound good?

Your loving husband

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

I type a quick response.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 15 September 2009: 14:10
To: Edward Cullen

Sure.
x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 15 September 2009: 14.14
To: Isabella Cullen

Are you okay?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

No Edward I'm not. I'm freaking out about you freaking out. I don't know what to do. But I am not going to tell you via email.

From: Isabella Cullen
Subject: Missing you
Date: 15 September 2009: 14:17
To: Edward Cullen

Fine. Just busy.
See you at 6.00
x

Isabella Cullen
Commissioning Editor, SIP

When will I tell him? Tonight? Maybe after sex? Maybe during sex. No, that might be dangerous for both of us. When he's asleep? I put my head in my hands. What the hell am I going to do?

~

"Hi," Edward says warily as I clamber into the SUV.

"Hi," I murmur back.

"What's wrong?" he asks, his brow furrowing.

I shake my head as Taylor sets off towards the hospital.

"Nothing."

Maybe now? I could tell him now, when we're in a contained space and Taylor is with us.

"Is work all right?" Edward continues to probe.

"Yes. Fine. Thanks."

"Bella, what's wrong?" His tone is a little more forceful. I chicken out.

"I've just missed you, that's all. And I've been worried about Charlie."

Edward visibly relaxes.

"Charlie's good. I spoke to Dad this afternoon and he's impressed with his progress." Reaching across Edward grasps my hand. "Boy, your hand is cold. Have you eaten today?"

I flush.

"Bella," Edward scolds me, and he's annoyed.

Well, I haven't eaten because I know you're going to go bat shit crazy when I tell you I'm pregnant.

"I'll eat this evening. I haven't really had time."

He shakes his head in frustration.

"Do you want me to add 'feed my wife' to the security detail's list of duties?"

"I'm sorry. I'll eat. It's just been a weird day. You know, moving Dad and all."

His lips press into a hard line, but he says nothing. I gaze out of the window. *Tell him!* my subconscious hisses. No. I am a coward.

Edward interrupts my reverie. "I may have to go to Taiwan."

"Oh. When?"

"Later this week. Maybe next week."

"Okay."

"I want you to come with me."

I swallow.

"Edward, please. I have my job. Let's not rehash this argument again."

He sighs and pouts like a sulky teenager.

"Thought I'd ask," he mutters petulantly.

"How long will you go for?"

"Not more than a couple of days. I wish you'd tell me what's bothering you."

How can he tell? Holy fuck.

"Well, now that my beloved husband is going away…"

Edward kisses my knuckles.

"I won't be away for long."

"Good." I smile weakly at him.

~

Charlie is much brighter and a lot less grumpy when we see him. I'm touched by his quiet gratitude to Edward, and for a moment I forget about my impending news as I sit and listen to them talk fishing and the Mariners. But he tires easily.

"Daddy, we'll leave you to sleep."

"Thanks Bella honey. I like that you drop by. Saw your Dad today too, Edward. He was very reassuring. And he's a Mariners fan."

"He's not crazy about fishing, though," Edward says wryly as he rises.

"Well, no one's perfect, eh?" Charlie grins.

"I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" I lean over and kiss him. My subconscious purses her lips. *That's provided Edward hasn't locked you away… or worse.* My spirits take a nosedive. Oh yes – I'm pregnant with my little Blip. I blanch as I remember.

"Come." Edward holds out his hand, frowning at me. I take it and we head out of the hospital.

~

I pick at my food. It's Mrs Cope's chicken chasseur, but I'm just not hungry. My stomach is knotted in a tight ball of anxiety.

"Damn it! Bella, will you tell me what's wrong?" Edward pushes his empty plate away, irritated. I gaze at him.

"Please. You're driving me crazy."

I swallow, and try to subdue the panic rising in my throat. I take a deep steadying breath. It's now or never.

"I'm pregnant."

He stills, and very slowly all the color drains from his face.

"What?" he whispers, ashen.

"I'm pregnant."

His brow furrows, as if he's not comprehending at all.

"How?"

I blink at him. How… *how?* What sort of ridiculous question is that? I flush, and give him a quizzical how-do-you-think look. His stance changes immediately, his eyes hardening to flint.

"Your shot?" he barks.

Oh shit.

"Did you forget your shot?"

I just gaze at him unable to speak. Jeez, he's mad – really mad.

"Christ, Bella!" He bangs his fist on the table, making me jump, and stands so abruptly he almost knocks the dining chair over. "You have one thing, one thing to remember. Shit! I don't fucking believe it. How could you be so stupid?"

Stupid! I gasp. Shit. I contemplate lying to him, telling him the shot was ineffective… but then he might call Dr Greene. I gaze down at my fingers.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"Sorry? Fuck!" he says again.

"I know the timing's not very good."

"Not Very Good?" he shouts. "We've known each other five fucking minutes. I wanted to show you the fucking world and now… Fuck. Diapers and vomit and shit!" He closes his eyes. I think he's trying to contain his temper, and losing the battle.

"Did you forget? Tell me. Or did you do this on purpose?" His eyes blaze and anger emanates off him like a force field.

"No," I whisper. I can't tell him about Hanna, he'd fire her. I know.

"I thought we'd agreed on this," he shouts.

"I know. We had. I'm sorry."

He ignores me.

"This is why. This is why I like control. So things like this don't come along and fuck everything up."

Thing… my little Blip is not a *thing.*

"Edward, please don't shout at me." Tears start to slip down my face.

"Don't start with waterworks now," he snaps. "Fuck." He runs a hand through his hair, pulling at it as he does.

"You think I'm ready to be a father?" His voice catches, and it's a mixture of rage and panic.

And it all becomes clear, the fear and loathing writ large in his eyes – his rage is that of a powerless adolescent. Oh Fifty, I am so sorry. It's a shock for me too.

"I know neither one of us is ready for this, but I think you'll make a wonderful father," I choke. "We'll muddle through."

"How the fuck do you know?" he shouts, louder this time. "Tell me how!" His green eyes burn, and so many emotions cross his face… fear… fear being the most prominent.

"Oh, fuck this!" Edward says dismissively, and holds his hands up in a gesture of defeat. He turns on his heel and stalks towards the foyer, grabbing his jacket as he leaves the great room. His footsteps echo off the wooden floor, and he disappears through the double doors into the foyer, slamming the door behind him and making me jump once more.

All I am left with is the silence… the still, silent emptiness of the great room. I shudder involuntarily as I gaze numbly at the closed doors. He's walked out on me. *Shit!* His reaction is worse than I could ever have imagined. I push my plate away and fold my arms on the table, letting my head sink into them while I weep.

"Bella, dear." Mrs Cope is hovering beside me.

Oh. I sit up quickly, dashing the tears from my face.

"I heard. I'm sorry," she says gently. "Would you like a herbal tea or something?"

"I'd like a glass of white wine."

Mrs Cope pauses for a fraction of a second, and I remember my Blip. Now I can't drink alcohol. Can I? I must study the do's and don'ts Dr Greene gave me.

"I'll get you a glass."

"Actually, I'll have a cup of tea please." I wipe my nose.

She smiles kindly.

"Cup of tea coming up." She clears our plates and heads over to the kitchen area. I follow her and perch on a stool, watching her prepare my tea.

She places a steaming mug in front of me.

"Is there anything else I can get for you, Bella?"

"No, this is fine, thank you."

"Are you sure? You didn't eat much."

I gaze up at her.

"I'm just not hungry."

"Bella, you should eat. It's not just you anymore. Please let me fix you something. What would you like?" She looks so hopefully at me. But really, I can't face anything. My husband has just walked out on me because I'm pregnant, my father has been in a major car accident, and then there's James Smith the head-case trying to make out that I sexually harassed him. I suddenly have an uncontrollable urge to giggle. *See what you've done to me, little Blip!* I caress my belly.

Mrs Cope smiles indulgently at me.

"Do you know how far you are?" she asks softly.

"Very newly pregnant. Four or five weeks, the Doctor isn't sure."

"If you won't eat, then at least you should rest."

I nod, and taking my tea I head into the library. It's my refuge. I dig my BlackBerry out of my purse and contemplate calling Edward. I know it's a shock for him – but he really did over-react. *When does he not over-react?* My subconscious arches a finely plucked brow at me. I sigh. Fifty Shades of fucked up.

"Yes, that's your daddy, little Blip. Hopefully he'll cool off and come back… soon."

I pull out the leaflet of Do's and Don'ts and sit down to read.

I can't concentrate. Edward's never walked out on me before. Suppose he never comes back? Shit! Perhaps I should call Banner. I don't know what to do. I'm at a loss. He's so fragile, in so many ways, and deep down I knew this wasn't going to go down well with him. He was so sweet this weekend. All those circumstances way beyond his control, yet he managed fine. But this news was too much.

Ever since I've met him my life has been so complicated. Is it him? Is it the two of us together? Suppose he doesn't get past this? My mother and father never managed to. Suppose he wants a divorce? Bile rises in my throat. No. I mustn't think this way. He'll be back. He will. I know he will. I know in spite of all the shouting and his harsh words he loves me… yes. And he'll love you too, little Blip.

Leaning back in my chair, I doze.

I wake, cold and disorientated, and shiver as I check my watch. Eleven in the evening. Oh yes… You. I hug my belly. Where's Edward? Is he back? Stiffly I clamber out of the armchair and go in search of my husband.

Five minutes later, I realize he's not home. Oh no… I hope nothing's happened to him. Memories of the long wait when Echo Charlie went missing flood back. No no no. Stop thinking like this. He's probably gone to… where? Who would he go and see? Emmett? Or maybe he's with Banner. I hope so. I find my BlackBerry back in the library, and I text him.

Where are you?

I head into the bathroom and run myself a bath. I am so cold.

He still hasn't returned when I climb out of the bath. I change into one of my 1930s style satin nightdresses and my robe, and head for the great room. On the way I pop into the spare bedroom… perhaps this could be little Blip's room. I am startled by the thought, and stand in the doorway contemplating this reality. Will we paint it blue or pink? The sweet thought is soured by the fact that my husband is so pissed off at the idea, and absent. Grabbing the duvet from the spare bed I head into the great room to keep vigil.

~

Something wakes me. A sound.

"Shit!" It's Edward in the foyer. I hear the table scrape across the floor again. "Shit!" he repeats, more muffled this time. I scramble up in time to see him stagger through the double doors.

Fuck. *He's drunk.* My scalp prickles. Shit, Edward drunk? I know how much he hates drunks. Oh no. I leap up and run towards him.

"Edward, are you okay?"

He leans against the jamb of the foyer doors.

"Mrs Cullen," he slurs.

Oh no. He's *very* drunk. I don't know what to do.

"Oh… you look mighty fine, Isabella."

"Where have you been?"

He puts his fingers to his lips and smiles crookedly at me.

"Shh! Not telling."

"I think you'd better come to bed."

"With you…" he giggles. *Giggling!*

Frowning at him I gently put my arm around his waist, because he can hardly stand, let alone walk. Shit! Where has he been? How did he get home?

"Let me help you to bed. Lean on me," I murmur.

"You are so beautiful, Bella," he says. He leans onto me and sniffs my hair, almost knocking both of us over.

"Edward, walk. I am going to put you to bed."

"Okay," he says, as if he's trying to concentrate. We stumble down the corridor and finally make it into the bedroom.

"Bed," he says, grinning.

"Yes, bed." I maneuver him to the edge, but he holds me.

"Join me," he says.

"Edward, I think you need some sleep."

"And so it begins. I've heard about this."

I frown.

"Heard about what?"

"Babies mean no sex."

"I'm sure that's not true. Otherwise we'd all come from one-child families."

He gazes down at me.

"You're funny."

"You're drunk."

"Yes." He smiles, but his smile changes as he thinks about it, and a haunted expression crosses his face, a look that chills me to the bone.

"Come on, Edward," I say gently. I hate his expression. It speaks of horrid, ugly memories that no child should see. "Let's get you into bed."

I push him gently and he flops down on to the mattress, sprawling in all directions, grinning up at me, his haunted expression gone.

"Join me," he slurs.

"Let's get you undressed first."

He grins widely, drunkenly.

"Now you're talking," he says.

Holy cow. Drunk Edward can be cute and playful. I'll take him over mad-as-hell Edward anytime.

"Sit up. Let me take your jacket off."

"The room is spinning."

Shit… is he going to throw up?

"Edward, sit up!"

He smirks up at me.

"Mrs Cullen, you are a bossy little thing…"

"Yes. Do as you're told and sit up." I put my hands on my hips. He grins again, struggles up onto his elbows, then sits up in a most un-Edward, gawky fashion. Sheesh!

Before he can flop down again, I grab his tie and wrestle him out of his grey jacket, one arm at a time.

"You smell good," he says.

"You smell of hard liquor."

"Yes… bourbon." He pronounces the syllables with such exaggeration that I have to stifle a giggle. Discarding his jacket on the floor beside me I make a start on his tie. He rests his hands on my hips.

"I like the feel of this fabric on you, Isabella," he says, slurring his words. "You should always be in satin." He runs his hand up and down my hips, then jerks me forward, pressing his mouth against my belly.

"And we have an invader in here."

I stop breathing. Holy Crow. He's talking to little Blip.

"You're going to keep me awake, aren't you?" he says to my belly.

Oh my. Edward looks up at me, green eyes blurred and cloudy. My heart constricts.

"You'll choose him over me," he says sadly.

"Edward, you don't know what you're talking about. Don't be ridiculous – I am not choosing anyone over anyone. And he might be a she."

He frowns.

"A she… Oh God." He flops back down on to the bed and covers his eyes with his arm. I have managed to loosen his tie. I bend, undo one shoelace and yank off his shoe and sock. I make a start on the other and succeed in no time. When I stand I see why I met no resistance – Edward has passed out completely. He's asleep and snoring slightly.

I stand staring at him. He's so goddamned beautiful, even drunk and snoring. His sculptured lips parted, he snores gently, one arm above his head ruffling his messy hair, his

face relaxed. He looks young – but then he is young. My young, stressed out, drunk, unhappy husband. The thought lies heavy in my heart. Well, at least he's home. I wonder where he went? I'm not sure I have the energy or the strength to move him or undress him any further. He's on top of the duvet, too. Heading back into the great room I pick up the duvet I was using and bring it back to our bedroom.

He's still lying there, fast asleep, still wearing his tie and his belt. I climb on to the bed beside him, loosen his tie further then remove it altogether, and gently undo the top button of his shirt. He mumbles something incoherent in his sleep, but he doesn't wake. Carefully I unbuckle his belt and pull it through the belt loops… after some difficulty it's off. His shirt has come dislodged from his pants, revealing a hint of his happy trail. I can't resist. I bend and kiss it. He shifts, flexing his hips forward, but stays asleep.

I sit up and gaze at him again. Oh Fifty, Fifty, Fifty… what am I going to do with you? Reaching up I brush my fingers through his hair. It's so soft. I lean down and kiss his temple.

"I love you, Edward. Even when you're drunk and you've been out God knows where, I love you. I'll always love you."

"Hmmm," he murmurs. I kiss his temple once more, then clamber off the bed and cover him up with the spare duvet. I can sleep beside him, sideways across the bed… yes, I'll do that.

First I'll sort out his clothes though. I shake my head and pick up his socks and tie and fold his jacket over my arm. As I do his BlackBerry falls to the floor. I pick it up and inadvertently unlock it. It opens on the texts screen.

I can see my text, and above it, another.

Fuck. My scalp prickles.

***It was good to see you. I understand now.**
Don't fret. You'll make a wonderful father.*

It's from *her*. Mrs Irina Bitch Troll Robinson.

Shit. That's where he went.

He's been to see *her*.

Chapter 112/25

I gape at the text, then look up at the sleeping form of my husband. He's been out until 1.30 in the morning drinking – with *her!* He snores softly, sleeping the sleep of a seemingly innocent, oblivious drunk. He looks so serene. Oh no, no, no.

My legs turn to jelly, and I sink slowly to the chair beside the bed in disbelief. Raw, bitter humiliating betrayal lances through me. How could he? How could he go to her? Scalding angry tears ooze down my cheeks. His wrath and fear, his need to lash out at me I can understand, and forgive – just. But this… this treachery is too much. I pull my knees up against my chest and wrap my arms around them, protecting me and protecting my little Blip. I rock to and fro, weeping softly.

Was it ever thus? What did I expect? I married this man too quickly. I knew it – I knew it would come to this. Why. Why. *Why?* How could he do this to me? He knows how I feel about that woman. How could he turn to her? How? The knife twists slow and painfully deep in my heart, lacerating me. Will it always be this way?

The tears flow and his prostrate figure blurs and shimmers through my tears. *Oh Edward.* I married him because I love him, and deep down I know that he loves me. I know he does. His achingly sweet birthday present comes to mind.

For all our firsts on your first birthday as my beloved wife. I love you. E x

No, no, no – I can't believe that it will always be this way, two steps forward and three steps back. But that's how it's always been with him. After each setback we move forward, inch by inch. He will come around… he will. But will I? Will I recover from this treachery? I think about how he's been this last, horrible, wonderful weekend. His quiet strength while my father lay broken and comatose in the ICU… my surprise party, bringing my family and friends together… dipping me down low outside the Heathman and kissing me in full public view. Oh Edward, you strain all my credulity, all my faith… but I love you. And it's not just me now.

I place my hand on my belly. No, I will not let him do this to me and our Blip. Dr Banner said I should give him the benefit of the doubt – well, not this time. I dash the tears from my eyes and wipe my nose with the back of my hand. Edward stirs and rolls over, pulling his legs up from the side of the bed, and curls up beneath the duvet. He stretches out a hand, as if searching for something, then grumbles and frowns, but settles back to sleep, his arm outstretched. Oh Fifty. What am I going to do with you? And what the hell were you doing with the Bitch Troll? I need to know.

I glance once more at the offending text and quickly hatch a plan. Taking a deep breath I forward the text to my BlackBerry. Step one complete. I quickly check the other recent

texts, but can only see messages from Emmett, Angela, Taylor, Kate and me. None from Irina. Good, I think. I exit the text screen, relieved that he hasn't been texting her… and my heart lurches into my throat. *Oh my.* The wallpaper on his phone is photograph upon photograph of me, a patchwork of tiny Isabellas in various poses… from our honeymoon, from our recent weekend sailing and soaring, and a few of Jake's photos too. When did he do this? It must have been recently.

I notice his email icon, and an idea slithers enticingly into my mind… I could read Edward's emails. See if he's been talking to *her?* Should I? Sheathed in jade green silk my inner goddess nods emphatically, her mouth set in a scowl. Before I can stop myself I am invading his privacy.

There are hundreds and hundreds of emails. I spin down through them, and they look dull as dishwater… mostly from Kate, Angela and me, and various executives in his company. None from the Bitch Troll. While I'm at it, I'm relieved to see there are none from Lauren either.

One email catches my eye. It's from Barney Sullivan, Edward's IT guy, and the subject line is: James Smith. I glance guiltily at Edward, but he's still snoring gently. I've never heard him snore. I open the email.

From: Barney Sullivan
Subject: James Smith
Date: 15 September 2009 14:09
To: Edward Cullen

CCTV around Seattle tracks the white van from South Irving Street. Before that I can find no trace so Smith must have been based in that area.

As Jenks has told you the unsub car was rented under a false license by an unknown female, nothing that ties up to the South Irving Street area.

Details of known CEH and SIP employees who live in the area are in the attached file, which I have forwarded to Jenks too.

There was nothing on Smith's SIP computer about his former PAs.

As a reminder here is a list of what was retrieved from Smith's SIP computer.

<u>Cullens' Home Addresses</u>
Five properties in Seattle
Two properties in Detroit

Resumés for:
Dr Carlisle Cullen
Emmett Cullen
Edward Cullen
Esme Cullen
Isabella Swan
Alice Cullen

Newspaper and online articles relating to:
Dr Carlisle Cullen
Edward Cullen
Emmett Cullen

Photographs
Dr Carlisle Cullen
Esme Cullen
Edward Cullen
Emmett Cullen
Alice Cullen

I'll carry on, see what else I can find.

B Sullivan
Head of IT, CEH.

This odd email momentarily sidetracks me from my night of woe. I click on the attachment to check through the names on the list, but it's obviously huge, too big to open on the BlackBerry.

What am I doing? It's late. I've had a tiring day. There are no emails from the Bitch Troll or Lauren Elliot, and I take some cold comfort from that. I glance quickly at the alarm clock: it's just after 2.00 am. Today has been a day of revelations. I am to be a mother, and my husband has been fraternizing with the enemy. Well, let him stew. I am not sleeping here with him – he can wake up alone tomorrow. Placing his BlackBerry on his bedside table I retrieve my purse from beside the bed and after one last look at my angelic, sleeping Judas, head into the great room.

I fetch the playroom key from the cabinet in the utility room and make my way upstairs. From the linen closet I retrieve a pillow, duvet and sheet, then unlock the playroom door and enter. I switch on the lights, then dim them. Odd that I find the smell and ambience of this room so comforting, considering I safe-worded the last time we were in here. I lock the door behind me, leaving the key in the lock. I know that tomorrow morning Edward will be frantic to find me, and I don't think he'll look in here if the door's locked. Well, it will serve him right.

I curl up on the Chesterfield couch, wrap myself in the duvet and drag my BlackBerry from my purse. Checking my texts I find the one from the evil Bitch Troll that I forwarded from Edward's phone. I press 'Forward' and type:

WOULD YOU LIKE MRS LINCOLN TO JOIN US WHEN WE EVENTUALLY DISCUSS THIS TEXT SHE SENT TO YOU? IT WILL SAVE YOU RUNNING TO HER AFTERWARDS. YOUR WIFE

– and press 'Send'. I switch the volume to mute.

I curl up smaller under my duvet. For all my bravado I am overwhelmed by the enormity of Edward's deceit. This should be a happy time – jeez, we're going to be parents. Briefly I fantasize about me telling Edward that I'm pregnant and him falling to his knees in front of me with joy and pulling me into his arms and telling me how much he loves me and our Little Blip. Yet here I am, alone and cold in a BDSM fantasy room. Suddenly I feel old… older than my years. Taking on Edward was always going to be a challenge, but he really has surpassed himself this time. But in my heart of hearts I know I am stronger than he is, and if he wants a fight, I'll give him a fight. No way am I going to let him get away with running off to see that heinous whore whenever we have a problem. He's going to have to choose – her, or me and our little Blip. I sniffle softly, but because I'm so exhausted I soon fall asleep.

~

I wake with a start, momentarily disorientated… oh yes – I'm in the playroom. Because there are no windows, I have no idea what time it is. The door handle rattles.

"BELLA!" Edward shouts from outside. I freeze… but he doesn't come in. I hear muffled voices outside, but they move away. I exhale, and check the time on my BlackBerry. It's 7.50 am, and I have four missed calls and two voice messages. The missed calls are mostly from Edward, but there's also one from Rose. Oh no – he must have called her. I don't have time to listen to them – I don't want to be late for work. Pulling the duvet around me and picking up my purse I make my way to the door. Unlocking it slowly I peek outside. No sign of anyone. Oh shit… perhaps this is a bit melodramatic. I roll my eyes at myself, take a deep breath and head downstairs.

Taylor, Stuart, Ryan, Mrs Cope and Edward are all standing in entrance to the great room, Edward issuing rapid-fire instructions. As one they all turn and gape at me. Edward is still wearing the clothes he slept in last night. He looks disheveled, pale and heartstoppingly beautiful. His large green eyes are wide and I don't know if he's fearful or angry. It's difficult to tell.

"Stuart, I'll be ready to leave in about twenty minutes," I mutter, wrapping the duvet tighter around me for protection. He nods, and all eyes turn to Edward, who is still staring intensely at me.

"Would you like some breakfast, Mrs Cullen?" Mrs Cope asks. I shake my head.

"I'm not hungry, thank you." She purses her lips but says nothing.

"Where were you?" Edward asks, his voice low and husky. Suddenly Stuart, Taylor, Ryan and Mrs Cope scatter, scuttling into Taylor's office, into the foyer and into the kitchen like terrified rats from a sinking ship.

I ignore Edward and head towards our bedroom.

"Bella," he calls after me. "Answer me." I hear his footsteps behind me as I walk into the bedroom and continue into our bathroom. Quickly I turn and lock the door.

"Bella!" Edward knocks on the door. I turn on the shower. The door rattles. "Bella, open the damned door."

"Go away!"

"I'm not going anywhere."

"Suit yourself."

"Bella, please."

I climb into the shower, effectively blocking him out. Oh it's warm. The healing water cascades over me, cleansing the exhaustion of the night off my skin. *Oh my*. This feels so good. For a moment, for one short moment, I can pretend all is well. I wash my hair… *I'm gonna wash that man…* I snort. By the time I have finished I feel better, stronger, ready to face the freight train that is Edward Cullen. I wrap my hair in a towel, briskly dry myself and wrap the towel around me.

I unlock the door and open it. Edward is leaning against the wall opposite, his hands behind his back. His expression is wary, that of a hunted predator. I ignore him, striding into our walk-in closet.

"Are you ignoring me?" Edward asks in disbelief as he stands on the threshold of the closet.

"Perceptive, aren't you?" I murmur absentmindedly as I search for something to wear. Ah yes – my plum dress. I slide it off the hanger, choose my high black stiletto boots and head

for the bedroom. I pause for Edward to step out of my way, which he does, eventually – his intrinsic good manners taking over. I feel his eyes boring into me as I head over to my chest of drawers. I can see him in the mirror, standing motionless in the doorway, watching me. In an act worthy of an Oscar winner I let my towel fall to the floor and pretend that I am oblivious to my naked body. I hear his restrained gasp, and ignore it.

"Why are you doing this?" he asks. His voice is low.

"I'm too stupid to know." My voice is velvet soft as I pull out a pretty pair of black lace La Perla panties.

"Bella – " He stops as I shimmy into them.

"Go ask your Mrs Robinson. I'm sure she'll have an explanation for you," I mutter as I search for the matching bra.

"Bella I've told you before, she's not my –"

"I don't want to hear it, Edward." I wave my hand dismissively. "The time for talking was yesterday, but instead you decided to rant, and go get drunk with the woman who abused you for years. Well, give her a call. I am sure she'll be more than willing to listen to you now." I find the matching bra at last, slowly pull it on and fasten it. Edward walks further into the bedroom and places his hands on his hips.

"So you've been snooping on me?" he says.

In spite of my resolve I flush.

"That's not the point, Edward," I snap at him. "Fact is, going gets tough and you run to her."

His mouth settles into a grim line.

"It wasn't like that."

"I'm not interested." Picking a pair of black thigh highs with lacey tops I retreat to the bed. I sit, point my toe and gently ease the gossamer material up to my thigh.

"Where were you?" he asks, his eyes following my hands up my legs, but I continue to ignore him as I slowly roll on the other stocking. Standing, I bend to towel-dry my hair. Through my parted thighs I can see his bare feet, and I sense him watching me intensely. When I've finished I stand and step back to the chest of drawers where I grab my hairdryer.

"Answer me." Edwards murmurs, his voice low and husky.

I switch on the hairdryer so I can no longer hear him, and watch him in the mirror through my lashes as I finger dry my hair. He gazes at me, green eyes narrow and cool, chilling even. I look away, focusing on the task in hand and trying to suppress the shiver that runs through me. I swallow hard and concentrate on drying my hair. He's still mad. He goes out with that damned woman, and he's mad at *me?* How dare he? When my hair looks wild and untamed I stop. Yes… I like it. I switch off the hairdryer.

"Where were you?" he whispers, his tone arctic.

"What do you care?"

"Bella, stop this. Now."

I shrug, and Edward moves quickly across the room towards me. I whirl round, stepping back as he reaches out.

"Don't touch me," I hiss, and he freezes.

"Where were you?" he demands. His hands fist at his side.

"I wasn't out getting drunk with my ex," I seethe. "Did you sleep with her?"

He gasps.

"*What?* No!" He gapes at me, and has the gall to look wounded and angry at the same time. My subconscious breathes a small welcome sigh of relief.

"You think I'd cheat on you?" He's disgusted.

"You did," I snarl. "By taking our very private life and spilling your spineless guts to that woman."

His mouth drops open.

"Spineless. That's what you think?" His eyes blaze.

"Edward, I saw the text. That's what I know."

"That text was not meant for you," he growls.

"Well, fact is I saw it when your BlackBerry fell out of your jacket. While I was undressing you because you were too drunk to undress yourself. Do you have any idea how much you've hurt me, going to see that woman?"

He pales momentarily but I'm on a roll, my inner bitch unleashed.

"Do you remember last night when you came home? Remember what you said?"

He gazes at me, green eyes blazing hot, the rest of his face frozen.

"Well, you were right. I do choose this defenseless baby over you. That's what any loving parent does. That's what your mother should have done for you. And I am sorry that she didn't – because we wouldn't be having this conversation right now if she had. But you're an adult now – you need to grow up and smell the fucking coffee and stop behaving like a petulant adolescent.

"You may not be happy about this baby. I'm not ecstatic, given the timing and your less-than-lukewarm reception to this new life, this flesh of your flesh. But you can either do this with me, or I'll do it on my own. The decision is yours.

"While you wallow in your pit of self-pity and self-loathing I'm going to work. And when I return I'll be moving my belongings to the room upstairs."

He blinks at me, shocked.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I'd like to finish getting dressed." I am breathing hard. Very slowly Edward retreats one step, his demeanor hardening.

"Is that what you want?" he whispers.

"I don't know what I want any more." My tone mirrors his, and it takes a monumental effort to feign disinterest while I casually dip the tips of my fingers into my moisturizer and smooth it gently over my skin. I peer at myself in the mirror. Brown eyes wide, face pale, but cheeks flushed. *You're doing great. Don't back down now. Don't back down now.*

"You don't want me?" he breathes.

Oh – no… oh no you don't, Cullen.

"I'm still here aren't I?" I mutter dismissively. Taking my mascara I apply some first to my right eye.

"You've thought about leaving?" His words are barely audible.

"It crossed my mind. When one's husband prefers the company of his ex-mistress it's usually not a good sign." I pitch the disdain at just the right level. Lip-gloss now. I pout my shiny lips at the image in the mirror. *Stay strong Swan… um – Cullen.* Holy Fuck, I can't even get my name right. Reaching down I pick up my boots, make my way to the bed once more and quickly put them on, tugging them up over my knees. Yep. I look hot just in underwear and boots. I know. I stand and gaze dispassionately at him. He blinks at me, and his eyes travel swiftly and greedily down my body.

"I know what you're doing here," he murmurs, and his voice has acquired a warm, seductive edge.

"Do you?" And my voice cracks. *No, Bella… hold on.*

He swallows and takes a step forward. I step back and hold my hands up.

"Don't even think about it, Cullen," I whisper menacingly.

"You're my wife," he says softly, threateningly.

"I'm the pregnant woman you abandoned yesterday, and if you touch me I will scream the place down."

His eyebrows rise slightly in disbelief.

"You'd scream?"

"Bloody murder." I narrow my eyes.

"No one would hear you," he murmurs, his gaze intense, and briefly I'm reminded of our morning in Aspen. No. No. No.

"Are you trying to frighten me?" I mutter breathless, deliberately trying to derail him. It works. He stills and swallows.

"That wasn't my intention." His eyes narrow. I can barely breathe. If he touches me, I will succumb. I know the power he wields over me, and over my traitorous body. I know.

"I had a drink with an old friend. We cleared the air. I am not going to see her again."

"You sought her out?"

"Not at first. I tried to see Banner. But I found myself at the salon."

Fuck.

"And you expect me to believe you're not going to see her again?" I cannot contain my fury as I hiss at him. "What about the next time I step across some imaginary line? This is the same argument we have over and over again. Like we're on some Ixion wheel. If I fuck up again, are you going to run back to her?"

"I am not going to see her again," he says with a chilling finality. "She finally understands how I feel."

I blink at him.

"What does that mean?"

He straightens and runs a hand through his hair, exasperated and angry and mute. I try a different tack.

"Why can you talk to her and not to me?"

"I was mad at you. Like I am now."

"You don't say," I snap. "Well *I* am mad at you right now. Mad at you for being so cold and callous yesterday when I needed you. Mad at you for saying I got knocked up deliberately. Mad at you for betraying me." I manage to suppress a sob. His mouth drops open in shock, and he closes his eyes briefly, as if I'd slapped him. I swallow. *Calm down Isabella*.

"I was stupid," I mutter petulantly, trying for a modicum of civility. "I should have kept better track of my shots. But I didn't do it on purpose . This pregnancy is a shock to me too."

He glares at me, silent.

"You really fucked up yesterday," I whisper. "I've had a lot to deal with over the last few weeks."

"You really fucked up three weeks ago. Or whenever you forgot your shot."

"God forbid I should be perfect like you."

Oh stop, stop, stop. We stand glowering at each other.

"This is quite a performance, Mrs Cullen," he whispers.

"Well, I'm glad that even knocked-up I'm so entertaining."

He blinks and gazes at me.

“I need a shower,” he murmurs.

“And I’ve provided enough of a floorshow.”

“It’s a mighty fine floor show,” he whispers. He steps forward, and I step back again.

“Don’t.”

“I hate that you won’t let me touch you,” he breathes.

“Ironic, huh?”

His eyes narrow once more.

“We haven’t resolved much, have we?”

“I’d say not. Except that I’m moving out of this bedroom.”

His eyes flare and widen briefly.

“She doesn’t mean anything to me.”

“Except when you need her.”

“I don’t need her. I need you.”

“You didn’t yesterday. That woman is a hard limit for me, Edward.”

“She’s out of my life.”

“I wish I could believe you.”

“For fuck’s sake, Bella.”

“Please let me get dressed.”

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair once more.

“I’ll see you this evening,” he says, his voice bleak and devoid of feeling. And for a moment I want to take him in my arms and soothe his tormented soul… but I resist, and he turns and heads for the bathroom. I stand frozen until I hear the door close.

I stagger to the bed and flop down on to it. My inner goddess and my subconscious are both giving me a standing ovation. I did not succumb to sexpertise, tears, shouting, or murder. I deserve a Congressional Medal of Honor. But why do I feel so low? Shit. We resolved nothing. We're on the edge of a precipice. Our marriage is at stake here – why can't he see what a complete and utter arse he's been, running to that woman? And what does he mean when he says he'll never see her again? How on earth am I supposed to believe that? I glance at the radio alarm – it's 8.45. Shit! I'll be late. I take a deep breath.

"Round Two was a stalemate, Little Blip," I whisper, patting my belly. "Daddy may be a lost cause. Oh I hope not. Why oh why did you come so early, Little Blip? Things were just getting good." My lip trembles, but I take a deep cleansing breath and bring my rolling emotions under control.

"Come on. Let's go kick ass at work."

I don't say goodbye to Edward. He's still in the shower when Stuart and I leave. As I gaze out of the darkened windows of the SUV my composure slips and my eyes water. My mood is reflected in the grey, dreary sky and I feel a strange sense of foreboding. We didn't actually discuss the baby. I have had less than twenty-four hours to assimilate the news of Little Blip – Edward has had even less time. "He doesn't even know your name." I caress my belly and wipe tears from my face.

"Mrs Cullen." Stuart interrupts my reverie. "We're here."

"Oh. Thanks Stuart."

"I'm going to make a run to the deli, ma'am. Can I get you anything?"

"No. Thank you, no. I'm not hungry."

Hanna has my latte waiting for me. I take one sniff of it and my stomach roils.

"Um – Can I have tea, please?" I mutter, embarrassed. I knew there was a reason I never really liked coffee. Jeez, it smells foul.

"You okay, Bella?"

I nod and scurry into the safety of my office.

My BlackBerry buzzes. It's Rose.

"Why was Edward looking for you?" she asks with no preamble at all.

"Good morning, Rose. How are you?"

"Cut the crap, Swan. What gives?"

The Rosalie Hale Inquisition begins.

"Edward and I had a fight, that's all."

"Did he hurt you?"

I roll my eyes.

"Yes, but not the way you're thinking." I cannot deal with Rose at the moment. I know I will cry – and right now I am so proud of myself for not breaking down this morning.

"Rose, I have a meeting. I'll call you back."

"Good. You're all right?"

"Yes." No. "I'll call you later, okay?"

"Okay Bella, have it your own way. I'm here for you."

Oh no…

"I know," I whisper. and fight the backlash of emotion at her kind words. *I am not going to cry. I am not going to cry.*

"Charlie okay?"

"Yes," I whisper the word.

"Oh Bella," she whispers.

"Don't."

"Okay. Talk later."

"Yes."

~

During the course of the morning I sporadically check my emails, hoping for word from Edward. But there's nothing. As the day wears on I realize he's not going to contact me at all, and that he's still mad. Well, I'm still mad too. I throw myself into my work, pausing

only at lunchtime for a cream cheese and salmon bagel. It's extraordinary how much better I feel once I've eaten something.

~

At 5pm Stuart and I set off for the hospital to see Charlie. Stuart is extra vigilant, and even over-solicitous. It's irritating. As we approach Charlie's room he hovers over me.

"Shall I get you some tea while you visit with your father?" he asks.

"No thanks, Stuart. I'll be fine."

"I'll wait outside." He opens the door for me, and I'm grateful to get away from him for a moment. Charlie is sitting up in bed reading a magazine. He's shaved, wearing a smart pj top – he looks like his old self.

"Hey, Bells," he grins. And his face falls.

"Oh Daddy…" I rush to his side, and in a very uncharacteristic move he opens his arms wide and hugs me.

"Bells," he whispers, "What is it?" He holds me tight and kisses my hair. As I'm in his arms I realize how rare these moments between us have been. Why is that? Is that why I like to crawl into Edward's lap? After a moment I pull away from him and sit down in the chair beside the bed. Charlie's brow is furrowed with concern.

"Tell your old man."

I shake my head. He doesn't need my problems right now.

"It's nothing Dad. You look well." I reach over and clasp his hand.

"Feeling more like myself. Though this leg in a cast is bitchin'."

"Bitchin'?" His word prompts my smile.

He smiles back at me.

"Bitchin'."

"Oh Daddy, I am so glad you're okay."

"Me too, Bells. I'd like to bounce some grandchildren on this bitchin' knee one day. Wouldn't want to miss that for the world."

I blink at him. *Shit.* Does he know?

"You and Edward getting along?"

I flush.

"We had a fight. We'll work it out."

He nods.

"He's a fine man, your husband," Charlie says reassuringly.

"He has his moments. What did the doctors say?"

~

Back at Escala, Edward is not home.

"Bella? Edward called and said that he'd be working late." Mrs Cope informs me apologetically.

"Oh. Thanks for letting me know." Why couldn't he tell me? Jeez, he really is taking his sulk to a whole new level. I am briefly reminded of the fight over our wedding vows and the major strop he had then. But I'm the aggrieved one here.

"What would you like to eat?" Mrs Cope has a determined, steely glint in her eye.

"Pasta."

She smiles.

"Spaghetti, penne, fusilli?"

"Spaghetti, your bolognese."

"Coming up. And Bella… you should know, Mr Cullen was frantic this morning when he thought you'd left. He was beside himself." She smiles fondly at me.

Oh…

~

He's still not home by 9.00. I am sitting at my desk in the library, wondering where he is. I call him.

"Bella," he says, his voice cool.

"Hi," I murmur.

He inhales softly.

"Hi," he says, his voice lower.

"Are you coming home?"

"Later."

"Are you in the office?"

"Yes. Where did you expect me to be?"

With her.

"I'll let you get on."

We both hang on the line, the silence stretching and tightening between us.

"Goodnight, Bella," he says eventually.

Oh!

"Goodnight, Edward."

He hangs up.

Oh shit. I gaze at my BlackBerry. I don't know what he expects me to do. I'm not going to let him walk all over me. Yes, he's mad, fair enough. I'm mad. But we are where we are. I haven't run off loose-lipped to my ex-paedo lover. I want him to acknowledge that that is not an acceptable way to behave.

I sit back in my chair, gazing at the billiard table in the library, and recall fun times playing snooker. Is this what my arrival did to my parents? Drove them apart? I place my hand on my belly. Maybe it's just too early. Maybe this is not meant to be… And even as I think that, my subconscious is screaming *no!* If I terminate this pregnancy I will never forgive myself – or Edward. "Oh Blip… what have you done to us?" I can't face talking to Rose. I can't face talking to anyone. I text her, promising to call soon.

By eleven I can no longer keep my eyelids open. Resigned I head up to my old room. Curling up beneath the duvet I finally let myself go, sobbing into my pillow, great heaving unladylike sobs of grief…

~

My head is heavy when I wake. Crisp fall light shines through the great windows of my room. Glancing at my alarm I see it's 7.30 am. My immediate thought is, where's Edward? I sit up and swing my legs out of bed. On the floor beside the bed is Edward's silver-grey tie, my favorite. It wasn't there when I went to bed last night. Reaching down I pick it up. I stare at it, caressing the silky material between my thumbs and forefingers, and hug it against my cheek. He was here, watching me sleep. And a glimmer of hope sparks deep inside me.

Mrs Cope is busy in the kitchen when I arrive downstairs.

"Good morning," she says brightly.

"Morning. Edward?" I ask.

Her face falls.

"He's already left."

"So he did come home?" I need to check, even though I have his tie as evidence.

"He did." She pauses. "Bella, please forgive me for speaking out of turn, but don't give up on him. He's a stubborn man."

I nod, and she stops. I'm sure my expression tells her I do not want to discuss my errant husband right now.

~

When I arrive at work, I check my emails. My heart leaps into overdrive when I see there's one from Edward.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Portland
Date: 17 September 2009: 06.45
To: Isabella Cullen

Bella,
I am flying down to Portland today.
I have some business to conclude with WSU.
I thought you would want to know.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Oh. Tears prick my eyes. That's it? My stomach flips. Shit! I am going to be sick. I race to the powder room and make it just in time, depositing my breakfast into the toilet. I sink to the floor of the cubicle and put my head in my hands. Could I be any more miserable? After a while, there's a gentle knock on the door.

"Bella?" It's Hanna.

Fuck.

"Yes?"

"Are you okay?"

"I'll be out in a moment."

"Mr Fox is here to see you."

Shit.

"Show him into the meeting room. I'll be there in a minute."

"Do you want some tea?"

"Please."

~

After my lunch – another cream cheese and salmon bagel, which I manage to keep down – I sit staring listlessly at my computer, looking for inspiration and wondering how Edward and I are going to resolve this huge problem.

My BlackBerry buzzes, making me jump. I glance at the screen – it's Alice. Jeez, that's all I need, her gushing and enthusiasm. I hesitate, wondering if I could just ignore it… but courtesy wins out.

"Alice," I answer brightly.

“Well hello there, Bella – long time no speak.” The male voice is familiar, and my world stops spinning.

Fuck! My scalp prickles and all the hair on my body stands to attention, as adrenaline floods through my system.

It’s James Smith.

Chapter 113/26

"James." My voice has disappeared, choked by fear. What does he want? How is he out of jail? Why does he have Alice's phone? The blood drains from my face and I feel dizzy.

"You do remember me," he says, his tone soft. I sense his bitter smile.

"Yes. Of course." My answer is automatic as my mind races.

"You're probably wondering why I called you."

"Yes."

Hang up.

"Don't hang up. I've been having a chat with your little sister-in-law."

WHAT? Alice! NO!

"What have you done?" I whisper, trying to quell my fear. *Alice… No…*

"Listen here, you prick teasing, gold digging whore. You fucked up my life. Cullen fucked up my life. You *owe* me. I have the little bitch with me now. And you, that shit you married, and his whole fucking family are going to pay."

Smith's contempt and bile takes me by surprise. What the hell? What has the Cullen family got to do with Edward and me?

"James, what do you want?"

"I want his money. I really want his fucking money. If things had been different, it could have been me. So *you're* going to get it for me. I want five million dollars, today."

"James, I don't have access to that kind of money."

He snorts his derision.

"You have two hours to get it. That's it – two hours. Tell no one or this little bitch gets it. Not the cops, not your prick of a husband, not his security team. I will know if you do. Understand?" He pauses and I try to respond, but my mouth is so dry I can't.

"You understand?" he shouts.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Or I will kill her."

I gasp.

"Keep your phone with you. Tell no-one or I'll fuck her up before l kill her. You have two hours."

"James. I need longer. Three hours. How do I know that you have her?"

The line goes dead. I gape in horror at the phone, as my mouth dries, leaving the nasty metallic taste of terror. *Alice, he has Alice.* Or does he? My mind whirrs at the obscene possibility and my stomach roils again. I think I'm going to be sick, but I inhale deeply, trying to steady my panic, and the nausea passes. My mind rockets through the possibilities. Tell Edward? Tell Taylor? Call the police? How will James know? Does he actually have Alice? Oh no. I need time, time to think – but I can only accomplish that by following his instructions. I grab my purse and head out of my office.

"Hanna, I have to go out. I am not sure how long I'll be. Cancel my appointments this afternoon. Let Victoria know I have to deal with an emergency."

"Sure, Bella. Everything okay?" Hanna frowns, concern etched on her face.

"Yes," I murmur distractedly, heading towards reception where Stuart is waiting.

"Stuart." He leaps up from the armchair at the sound of my voice, and frowns when he sees my face.

"I'm not feeling well. Please take me home."

"Sure, ma'am. Do you want me to get the car?"

"No I'll come with you. I'm in a hurry to get home."

-

I gaze out of the window in stark terror, running through my plan. Get home. Change. Find checkbook. Escape from Ryan and Stuart somehow. Go to bank. Hell, how much room does five million dollars take up? What will it weigh? Will I need a suitcase? Should I telephone the bank in advance? Alice. Alice. What if he doesn't have Alice? How can I check? If I call Esme it will raise her suspicions, and possibly endanger Alice. He said he would know. I glance out of the back of the SUV. Am I being followed? My heart races as I examine the cars following us. They look innocuous

enough. Oh Stuart, drive faster. Please. My eyes flicker to meet his in the rearview mirror and his brow creases.

Stuart presses a button on his Bluetooth headset to answer a call. "T… I wanted to let you know – Mrs Cullen is with me." Stuart's eyes are on me once more.

Who is he talking to?

He continues.

"She's unwell. I'm taking her back to Escala… I see… Sir." Stuart's eyes flick from the road to mine in the rearview mirror. "Yes," he agrees, and hangs up.

"Taylor?" I whisper.

He nods.

"He's with Mr Cullen?"

"Yes ma'am." Stuart's look softens in sympathy.

"Are they still in Portland?"

"Yes ma'am."

Good. I have to keep Edward safe. My hand strays down to my belly and I rub it consciously. And you, little Blip. Keep you both safe.

"Can we hurry please? I'm not feeling well."

"Yes ma'am." Stuart presses the accelerator and our car glides through the traffic.

-

Mrs Cope is nowhere to be seen when Stuart and I arrive in the flat. Since her car is missing from the garage I assume she's running errands with Ryan. Stuart heads for Taylor's office while I bolt to Edward's study. Scuttling in panic around his desk I wrench open the drawer to find the checkbooks. Lauren's gun slides forward into view. I feel an incongruous twinge of annoyance that Edward did not secure this weapon. He knows nothing about guns – jeez, he could get hurt. After a moment's hesitation I grab the pistol, check to ensure it's loaded and tuck it into the waistband of my black slacks. I might need it. I swallow at the thought. I've only ever practiced on targets – I've never fired a gun at anyone. *Forgive me, Charlie.* I turn my attention to tracking down the right checkbook. There are five, and only one is in the names of E Cullen and Mrs I Cullen. I

have about fifty four thousand dollars in my own account – I have no idea how much money is in this one. But Edward must be good for five million dollars, surely.

I take a deep breath, and in a more composed manner head to our bedroom. The bed has been made, and for a moment I feel a pang. Perhaps I should have slept here last night. What is the point of arguing with someone who by their own admission is fifty shades? He's not even talking to me now. No – I do not have time to think about this.

Quickly I change out of my slacks, pulling on jeans, a hooded sweatshirt and a pair of sneakers. From the closet I fish out a large soft duffle bag. Will five million dollars fit into this? Edward's gym bag is lying there on the floor. I open it, expecting to find it full of dirty laundry, but no – his gym kit is clean and fresh. Mrs Cope does indeed get everywhere. I dump the contents onto the floor and stuff his gym bag into my duffle. There, that should do it. I check I have my driver's license as ID for the bank, and check the time. It's been thirty-one minutes since James called. Now I just have to get out of Escala without Stuart seeing me.

I make my way slowly and quietly to the foyer, aware of the CCTV camera in there trained on the elevator. I think Stuart's still in Taylor's office. Cautiously I open the foyer door, making as little noise as possible. Shutting it softly behind me I stand on the very threshold, up against the door, out of the view of the CCTV lens. I fish my cell phone out of my purse and call Stuart.

"Mrs Cullen."

"Stuart, I'm in the room upstairs, can you give me a hand with something?" I keep my voice low, knowing he's just down the hallway on the other side of this door.

"I'll be right with you ma'am," he says, and I can hear his confusion. I've never telephoned him for help before. My heart is in my throat, pounding in a jarring frenetic rhythm. Will this work? I hang up and listen to his footsteps cross the hallway and go up the stairs. I take another deep steadying breath, and briefly contemplate the irony of escaping from my own home like a felon.

Once Stuart's reached the upstairs landing, I race to the elevator and punch the call button. The doors slide open – with the too-loud ping that announces the elevator is ready. I dash inside and frantically stab the button for the basement garage. After an agonizing pause the doors slowly start to slide shut, and as they do I hear Stuart's cries.

"Mrs Cullen!" As the lift doors shut I see him skid into the foyer. "Bella!" he shouts in disbelief. But he's too late, and he disappears from view.

The elevator sinks smoothly down to the garage level. I have a couple of minutes' start on Stuart, and I know he'll try to stop me. I glance longingly at my R8 as I rush to the Saab, open the door, toss the duffel bag onto the passenger seat and slide into the driving seat.

The Saab starts at the first try. The tires squeal as I race to the entrance and wait eleven agonizing seconds for the barrier to lift. The instant it's clear I drive out, catching sight of Stuart in my rearview mirror as he dashes out of service elevator into the garage. His bewildered, injured expression haunts me as I turn off the ramp into 4th Avenue.

I calm slightly. He will call Edward or Taylor, but I'll deal with that when I have to – I don't have time to dwell on it now. But I squirm uncomfortably in my seat, knowing, in my heart of hearts, that Stuart's probably lost his job. *Don't dwell.* I have to save Alice. I have to get to the bank and collect five million dollars. I glance in the rearview mirror, nervously anticipating the sight of the SUV bursting forth from the garage, but as I drive away there's no sign of Stuart.

-

The bank is sleek, modern and understated. There are hushed tones, echoing floors and pale green etched glass everywhere. I head straight to the Information desk.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" The young woman gives me a bright, insincere smile, and for a moment I regret changing into jeans.

"I'd like to withdraw a large amount of money."

Insincere Smile arches an even more insincere eyebrow.

"You have an account with us?" She fails to hide her sarcasm.

"Yes," I snap. "My husband and I have several accounts here. His name is Edward Cullen."

Her eyes widen fractionally and insincerity gives way to shock. Her eyes sweep up and down me once more, this time with a combination of disbelief and awe.

"This way, ma'am," she whispers, and leads me to a small, sparsely furnished office walled with more green-etched glass.

"Please take a seat." She gestures to a black leather chair by a glass desk bearing a state-of-the-art computer and phone. "How much will you be withdrawing today, Mrs Cullen?" she asks pleasantly.

"Five million dollars." I look her straight in the eye, like I ask for this amount of cash every day.

She blanches.

"I see. I'll fetch the manager. Oh – forgive me for asking, but do you have ID?"

"I do. But I'd like to speak to the manager."

"Of course, Mrs Cullen." She scuttles out. I sink into the seat, and a wave of nausea washes over me. Oh no – not now. I take a deep cleansing breath, and the wave passes. Nervously I check my watch. Twenty-five past two.

A middle-aged man enters the room. He has a receding hairline, but wears a sharp, expensive charcoal suit and matching tie. He holds out his hand.

"Mrs Cullen," he beams, "I'm Troy Whelan." We shake, and he sits down at the desk, opposite me.

"My colleague tells me you'd like to withdraw a large amount of money."

"That's correct. Five million dollars."

He turns to his sleek computer and taps in a few numbers.

"We normally ask some notice for large amounts of money." He pauses, and flashes me a reassuring but supercilious smile. "Fortunately, however, we hold the cash reserve for the entire Pacific Northwest," he boasts. Jeez – is he trying to impress me?

"Mr Whelan, I'm in a hurry. What do I need to do? I have my driver's license, and our joint account check book. Do I just write a check?"

"First things first, Mrs Cullen. Can I see the ID?" He switches from jovial show-off to serious banker.

"Here." I hand over my license.

"Mrs Cullen… this says Isabella Swan."

Oh shit.

"Oh… yes. Um."

"I'll call Mr Cullen."

"Oh – no, that won't be necessary."

Shit!

"I must have something with my married name." I rifle through my purse. What do I have with my name on it? I pull out my wallet, open it and find a photograph of Edward and me, on the bed in the Fair Lady's cabin. I can't show him that! I dig out my black Amex.

"Here."

"Mrs Isabella Cullen," Whelan reads. "Yes, that should do." He frowns. "You'll need to write a check."

"Sure. This account?" I show him my checkbook.

"That'll be fine. I'll also need you to complete some additional paperwork. If you'll excuse me for a moment."

I nod, and he rises and stalks out of the office. Again I release my held breath. I had no idea this would be so difficult. Clumsily I open my checkbook and pull a pen out of my purse. Do I just make it out to cash? I have no idea. With shaking fingers I write

Five million dollars. $5,000,000

Oh God, I hope I'm doing the right thing. Alice, think of Alice. I can't tell anyone.

Tell no one or I'll fuck her up before l kill her. James's chilling, repugnant words haunt me.

Mr Whelan returns, pale-faced and sheepish.

"Mrs Cullen? Your husband wants to speak with you," he murmurs, and points to the phone on the glass table between us.

What? No.

"He's on line one. Just press the button. I'll be outside." He has the grace to look embarrassed. Benedict Arnold has nothing on Whelan. I scowl at him, feeling the blood drain from my face again, as he shuffles out of the office.

Shit! Shit! *Shit!* What am I going to say to Edward? He'll know. He'll intervene. He's a danger to his sister. My hand trembles as I reach for the phone. I hold it against my ear, trying to calm my erratic breathing, and press the button for line one.

"Hi," I murmur, trying in vain to steady my nerves.

"You're leaving me?" Edward's words are an agonized, breathless whisper.

What?

"No!" My voice mirrors his. Oh no. Oh no. Oh no – how can he think that? The money? He thinks I'm going because of *the money*? And in moment of horrific clarity, I realize the only way I'm going to keep Edward at arm's length, out of harm's way, and to save his sister… is to lie.

"Yes," I whisper. And searing pain lances through me, tears springing to my eyes.

He gasps, almost a sob.

"Bella, I – " he chokes.

NO! My hand clutches my mouth as I stifle my warring emotions.

"Edward, please. Don't." I fight back tears.

"You're going?" he says.

"Yes."

"But why the cash? Was it always the money?" His tortured voice is barely audible.

NO! Tears roll down my face.

"No," I whisper.

"Is five million enough?"

Oh please, stop!

"Yes."

"And the baby?" His voice is a breathless echo.

What? My hand moves from my mouth to my belly.

"I'll take care of the baby," I murmur. *My little Blip… our little Blip.*

"This is what you want?"

No!

"Yes."

He inhales sharply.

"Take it all," he hisses.

"Edward," I sob. "It's for you. For your family. Please. Don't."

"Take it all, Isabella."

"Edward…" And I nearly cave. Nearly tell him, about James, about Alice, about the ransom. *Just trust me, please!* I silently beg him.

"I'll always love you." His voice is hoarse. He hangs up.

"Edward! No… I love you too." And all the stupid, stupid shit that we put each other through over the last few days fades into insignificance. I promised I'd never leave him. I am not leaving you. I am saving your sister. I slump into the chair weeping copiously into my hands.

I am interrupted by a timid knock on the door. Whelan enters, though I haven't acknowledged him. He looks everywhere but at me. He's mortified. *You called him, you bastard!* I glare at him.

"You have carte blanche, Mrs Cullen," he says. "Mr Cullen says whatever you need."

"I just need five million dollars," I mutter through gritted teeth.

"Yes ma'am. Are you all right?"

"Do I look all right?" I snap.

"I'm sorry ma'am. Some water?"

I nod, sullenly. I have just left my husband. Well, Edward thinks I have. My subconscious purses her lips: *because you told him so.* But I don't want to leave him. I love him.

"I'll have my colleague bring you some, while I prepare the money. If you could just sign here, ma'am… and make the check out to cash, and sign that too."

He places a form on the table. I scrawl my signature along the dotted line of the check, then the form. *Isabella Cullen.* Teardrops fall on the desk, narrowly missing the paperwork.

"I'll take those, ma'am. It will take us about half an hour to prepare the money."

I quickly check my watch. James said two hours – that should take us to two hours. I nod at Whelan and he tiptoes out of the office, leaving me to my misery.

A few moments, minutes, hours later – I don't know – Miss Insincere Smile re-enters with a carafe of water and a glass.

"Mrs Cullen," she says softly, sincerely, places the glass on the desk and fills it.

"Thank you," I mutter. I take the glass and drink gratefully.

She exits, leaving me with my jumbled, frightened thoughts. I will fix things with Edward somehow… if it's not too late. At least he's out of the picture. Right now I have to concentrate on Alice. Suppose James is lying? Suppose he doesn't have her? Surely I should call the police.

Tell no-one or I'll fuck her up before l kill her. I can't. I sit back in the chair, feeling the reassuring presence of Lauren's pistol at my waist digging into my back. Who would have thought I'd ever feel grateful that Lauren once pulled a gun on me? Oh Charlie, I'm so glad you taught me how to shoot.

Charlie! I gasp. He'll be expecting me to visit this evening. Perhaps I can simply dump the money with James. He can run, while I take Alice home… Oh, this sounds absurd.

My BlackBerry jumps to life, 'Your Love is King' filling the room. Oh no. It's Edward. What does he want? To twist the knife in my wounds?

Was it always the money?

Oh Edward – how could you think that? Anger flares in my gut. Yes, anger. It helps. I send the call to voicemail. I'll deal with my husband later.

There's a knock on the door.

"Mrs Cullen." It's Whelan. "The money is ready."

Oh no.

"Thank you," I murmur, and slowly stand up. The room spins momentarily, and I clutch the chair.

"Mrs Cullen, are you feeling okay?"

I nod, and give him a back-off-now-mister stare. Another deep calming breath. I have to do this. I have to do this. I must save Alice. I pull the hem of my hooded sweatshirt down, concealing the butt of the pistol in the back of my jeans.

Mr Whelan frowns, but holds open the door, and I propel myself forward on my shaking limbs out of the little office.

Stuart is waiting at the entrance, scanning the public area. Shit! How the hell did he find me? Our eyes meet, and he frowns at me, gauging my reaction. Oh, he's mad. Shit. I hold up my index finger in a with-you-in-a-minute gesture. He nods, and answers a call on his cell phone. Shit! I bet that's Edward. I turn abruptly, almost colliding with Whelan right behind me, and bolt into the little office.

"Mrs Cullen?" Whelan sounds confused as he follows me back in.

Stuart could blow this whole plan. Alice – No! I gaze up at Whelan.

"There's someone out there I don't want to see. Someone following me."

Whelan's eyes widen.

"Do you want me to call the Police?"

"No!" Holy Fuck, no. What am I going to do? I glance at my watch. It's nearly 3.15. James will call any moment. Think Bella, *think!* Whelan gazes at me in growing desperation and bewilderment. He must think I'm crazy. *You are crazy*, my subconscious snaps.

"I need to make a call. Could you give me some privacy please?"

"Certainly," Whelan answers – grateful, I think, to leave the room. When he's closed the door, I call Alice's cell phone with trembling fingers.

"Well, if it isn't my paycheck," James answers scornfully.

I don't have time for his bullshit.

"I have a problem."

"I know. Your security followed you to the bank."

What? How the hell does he know?"

"You'll have to lose him. I have a car waiting at the back of the bank. Black SUV, the Toyota. You have three minutes to get there."

"It may take longer than three minutes." My heart leaps into my throat once more.

"You're bright, for a gold-digging whore, Cullen. You figure it out. And dump your cell phone once you reach the vehicle. Got it, bitch?"

"Yes."

"Say it!" he snaps.

"I've got it."

He hangs up.

Shit! I open the door to find Whelan waiting patiently outside.

"Mr Whelan, I'll need some help taking the bags to my car. It's parked outside, at the back of the bank. Do you have an exit at the rear?"

He frowns.

"We do, yes. For staff."

"Can we leave that way? I can avoid the unwelcome attention at the door."

"As you wish, Mrs Cullen. I'll have two clerks help with the bags, and two security guards to supervise . If you could follow me?"

"I have one more favor to ask you."

"By all means, Mrs Cullen."

-

Two minutes later my entourage and I are out on the street, heading over to the Toyota. Its windows are blacked out, and I can't tell who's at the wheel. But as we approach, the driver's door swings open and a figure clad in black, with a black cap pulled low over her face, climbs gracefully out of the car. Shit! It's Victoria. She moves to the rear of the SUV and opens the trunk. The two young bank clerks carrying the money sling the heavy bags into the back.

"Mrs Cullen." She has the nerve to smile as if we are off on a friendly jaunt.

"Victoria." My greeting is arctic. "Nice to see you outside work."

Mr Whelan clears this throat.

"Well, it's been an interesting afternoon, Mrs Cullen," he says. And I am forced to observe the social niceties, shaking his hand and thanking him, while my mind is reeling. *Victoria?* What the hell? Why is she mixed up with James? Whelan and his team disappear back into the bank, leaving me alone with the head of personnel at SIP. Who is involved in kidnapping, extortion and very possibly other felonies. Why?

Victoria opens the rear passenger door and ushers me in.

"Your cell, Mrs Cullen?" she asks, watching me warily. I hand her the phone I'm carrying and she tosses it into a nearby trashcan.

"That will throw the dogs off the scent," she says smugly.

Who *is* this woman? Victoria slams my door shut and climbs into the driving seat. I glance anxiously behind me as she pulls out into the traffic. Stuart is nowhere to be seen.

"Victoria, you have the money. Call James. Tell him to let Alice go."

"I think he wants to thank you in person, Bella," she murmurs. *Shit!* I glare at her stonily in the rearview mirror. She flushes slightly and an anxious scowl mars her otherwise lovely face.

She's heading east. Where is she taking me?

"Why are you doing this, Victoria? I thought you didn't like James."

She glances at me again briefly in the mirror, and I see a fleeting look of pain in her eyes.

"Bella, we'll get along just fine if you keep your mouth shut," she mutters.

"But you can't do this. This is so wrong."

"Quiet, Bella," she says, but I can sense her unease.

"Does he have some kind of hold on you?" I ask. Her eyes shoot to mine and she slams on the brakes, throwing me forward so hard I hit my face against the headrest of the front seat.

"I said be quiet," she snarls. "And I suggest you put on your seatbelt."

And in that moment I know that he does. Something so awful that she's prepared to do this for him. I wonder briefly what that could be. Theft from the company? Something from her private life? Something sexual? I shudder at the thought. Edward said that none of James's PAs would talk. Perhaps it's the same story with all of them. *That's why he wanted to fuck me too.* Bile rises in my throat with revulsion at the thought.

Victoria heads away from downtown Seattle and up into the hills to the east. Before long we're driving through residential streets. I catch sight of one of the street signs: South Irving Street. She turns sharp left at a junction into a deserted street, with a dilapidated children's playground on one side and on the other a large concrete parking lot flanked by a row of squat, empty brick buildings. Victoria pulls into the parking lot and stops outside the last of the brick units.

She turns to me.

"Showtime," she murmurs. My scalp prickles as fear and adrenaline course through my body.

"You don't have to do this," I whisper back. Her mouth presses into a flat line, and she climbs out of the car. *This is for Alice. This is for Alice.* I quickly pray, *Please let her be okay, please let her be okay.*

"Get out," Victoria barks, yanking the rear passenger door open.

Shit.

As I clamber out my legs are shaking so hard I wonder if I can stand. The cool late-afternoon breeze carries the scent of the coming fall and the chalky, dusty smell of derelict buildings.

"Well, looky here." James emerges from a small, boarded-up door on the left of the building. His hair is short. He's removed his earrings, and he's wearing a suit. *A suit?* He ambles towards me, oozing arrogance and hate. My heart rate spikes.

"Where's Alice?" I stammer, my mouth so dry I can hardly form the words.

"First things first, bitch," James sneers, coming to a halt in front of me. I can practically taste his contempt. "The money?"

Victoria is checking the bags in the trunk.

"There's a helluvalot of cash here," she says in awe, zipping and unzipping each bag.

"And her cell?"

"In the trash."

"Good," James snarls, and from nowhere he lashes out, backhanding me hard across the face. The ferocious, unprovoked blow knocks me to the ground, and my head bounces with a sickening thud off the concrete. Pain explodes in my head, my eyes fill with tears, and my vision blurs as the shock of the impact resonates, unleashing agony that pulses through my skull.

I scream a silent cry of suffering and shocked terror. Oh no. Oh no – *Little Blip.* James follows through with a swift, vicious kick to my ribs, and my breath is blasted from my lungs by force of the blow. Scrunching my eyes tightly, I try to fight the nausea and pain, to fight for a precious breath. *Little Blip, little Blip, oh my little Blip* –

"That's for SIP, you fucking bitch," James screams.

I pull my legs up, huddling into a ball, anticipating the next blow. No. No. No.

"JAMES!" Victoria screeches, "Not here. Not in broad daylight. for fuck's sake!"

He pauses.

"The bitch deserves it!" he gloats to Victoria. And it gives me one precious second to reach round and pull the gun from the waistband of my jeans.

I squeeze the trigger and fire.

The bullet hits him just above the knee, and he collapses in front of me, crying out in agony, clutching his thigh as his fingers redden with his blood.

"FUCK!" James bellows. I turn to face Victoria, and she's gaping at me in horror, and raising her hands above her head. She blurs… darkness closes in. Shit… She's at the end of a tunnel. Darkness, consuming her. Consuming me. From far away all hell breaks loose. Cars screeching… brakes… doors… shouting… running… footsteps. The gun drops from my hand.

"BELLA!"

Edward's voice… Edward's voice… Edward's agonized voice. *Alice… save Alice.*

"Bella!"

Darkness… peace.

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There is only pain. My head, my chest… burning pain. My side, my arm. Pain. Pain, and whispered words in the darkness. Where am I? I cannot open my eyes. The whispered words become clearer… a beacon in the darkness.

"Her ribs are bruised, Mr Cullen, and she has a hairline fracture to her skull. We need to keep her here for observation."

"And the baby?" Breathless words. Breathless, anguished words.

"The baby's fine, Mr Cullen."

"Oh, thank God." Whispered breathless words. A litany… a prayer. "Oh thank God."

Oh my.

He's worried about the baby… *Little Blip*.

And the baby?… Oh thank God.

Little Blip is safe.

And the baby?… Oh thank God.

He cares about the baby.

And the baby?… Oh thank God.

He wants this baby. I relax, and unconsciousness claims me once more, stealing me away from the pain.

Chapter 114/27

Everything is heavy and aching: limbs, head, eyelids, nothing will move. I cannot open my eyes or my mouth. I am blind and mute and aching. As I surface from the fog, consciousness hovers, a seductive siren, just out of reach. Sounds become voices.

"I'm not leaving her." It's Edward! He's here… I will myself to wake – his voice is strained, a breathless whisper.

"Edward, you should sleep."

"No, Dad. I want to be here when she wakes up."

"I'll sit with her. It's the least I can do after she saved my daughter."

Alice! The fog closes in.

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The fog is light.

"How's Alice?"

"She's groggy, and scared, and angry. It'll be a few hours before the rohypnol is completely out of her system."

"Christ."

"I know. I'm feeling seven kinds of foolish for relenting on her security. You warned me, but Alice is so stubborn. If it wasn't for Bella here…"

"We all thought Smith was out of the picture. And this crazy, stupid wife of mine – Why didn't she tell me?" Edward's voice is full of anguish.

"Edward, calm down. Bella was incredibly brave."

"Brave and headstrong and stubborn and stupid." His voice cracks.

Oh no… Consciousness skips away, laughing, into the fog.

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I have no sense of time.

"If you don't take her across your knee, I sure as hell will. What the hell was she thinking?"

"Trust me, Charlie, I just might do that."

Daddy! He's here. I fight the fog… fight… but I spiral down once more into oblivion. No…

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"Detective, as you can see, my wife is no state to answer any of your questions." Edward is angry.

"She's a headstrong young woman, Mr Cullen."

"I wish she'd killed the fucker."

"That would have been more paperwork for me, Mr Cullen…

"Miss Morgan is singing like the proverbial. Smith's a real twisted son of a bitch. He has a serious grudge against your father and you…"

I slip away. NO!

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"What do you mean you weren't talking?" It's Esme. My mother-in-law. She sounds angry. I try to move my head, but I'm met with a resounding, listless silence from my body.

"What did you do?"

"Mom – "

"Edward! What did you do?"

"I was so angry." It's almost a sob… No.

"Hey…"

The world dips and blurs and I'm gone.

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I hear soft voices.

"*You told me you'd cut all ties."* Esme is talking. Her voice is quiet, admonishing.

"I know." Edward sounds resigned. *"But seeing her finally put it all in perspective for me. You know… with the child. For the first time I felt… repulsed."*

"…Children will do that to you, darling. Make you look at the world in a different light."

"She got the message."

"Good."

"I hurt Bella," he whispers.

"We always hurt the ones we love, darling. You'll have to tell her you're sorry. And mean it, and give her time."

"She said she was leaving me."

No. No. NO!

"Did you believe her?"

Oh… the darkness closes in. No –

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"…I'm glad we talked."

"Me too, darling. I'm always here."

"I know, Mom."

"I can't believe I'm going to be a grandmother."

Grandma! Oh my little Blip. Sweet oblivion beckons.

Hmm. His stubble softly scrapes the back of my hand as he squeezes my fingers.

"Oh baby, please come back to me. I'm sorry. Sorry for everything. Just wake up. I miss you. I love you…"

I try. I try. I want to see him. But my body disobeys me and I fall asleep once more.

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I have a pressing need, a pressing need to pee. I open my eyes. I'm in the clean sterile environment of a hospital room. It's dark, except for a sidelight, and all is quiet. My head and my chest aches but more than that my bladder is bursting. I need to pee. I test my limbs and they all move slightly. My right arm smarts and I notice the IV needle inserted. I shut my eyes quickly. Turning my head – I'm pleased that it responds to my will – I open my eyes again and see Edward there, asleep, leaning on my bed, his head on his folded arms. I reach up, grateful once more that my body responds, and my fingers find his soft hair.

He's startled awake, raising his head so suddenly my hand falls weakly back onto the bed.

"Hi," I croak.

"Oh, Bella," he chokes, green eyes wide. He grasps my hand, squeezing it tightly and holding it up against his rough-stubbled cheek.

"I need to pee," I whisper.

He gapes at me for a moment.

"Okay," he says, blinking.

I start to move and struggle to sit.

"Bella, stay still. I'll call a nurse." He quickly stands, alarmed, and reaches for a buzzer on the bedside, but I distract him before he can press it.

"No. I need to get up."

Jeez, I feel so weak.

"Will you do as you're told for once?" he snaps, exasperated.

"I really need to pee," I rasp. My throat and mouth is so dry.

"Dammit. I'll take you myself." He strides round the bed and moves the IV stand back. Leaning down he pulls back the blankets and sheets. I'm wearing a thin hospital gown. I don't remember being stripped. Gently he lifts me out of the bed, and I wrap my arms around his neck. My body protests. Jeez, I ache everywhere. Edward carries me, towing the IV, to the ensuite bathroom.

"Mrs Cullen, you're too light," he mutters disapprovingly as he sets me gently on my feet. I sway. My legs feel like Jell-O. Edward flips the light switch and I'm momentarily blinded by the fluorescent lamp that pings on.

"Sit before you fall," he snaps, still holding me.

Tentatively I sit down on the toilet.

"Go." I try to wave him out.

"No. Just pee, Bella."

Could this be any more embarrassing?

"I can't, not with you here."

"You might fall."

"Please," I beg.

He raises his hands in defeat.

"I'll stand outside, door open." He takes a couple of paces back until he's standing just outside the door.

"Turn around, please," I ask. Why do I feel so ridiculously shy with this man? He rolls his eyes, but complies, and when his back is turned I let go… and savor the relief.

I take stock of my injuries. My head hurts, my chest aches where James kicked me and my side throbs where he pushed me to the ground. Plus I'm thirsty and hungry. Jeez, really hungry. I finish up, thankful that I don't have to get up to wash my hands, as the sink is close. I just don't have the strength to stand.

"I'm done," I call, drying my hands on the towel.

Edward turns and comes back in, and before I know it I'm in his arms again. I have missed these arms… A nurse appears as he's putting me back into bed, and he releases me – reluctantly, I think. I hope.

"Mrs Cullen, you're awake," she says, surprised. She must be in her fifties, though her hair is jet black. She wears overlarge pearl earrings.

"Do you need anything? I'll let Doctor Bartley know you've woken up."

Bustling over she props me expertly up on my pillows.

"I'm thirsty."

"I'll fetch you some water. My name's Eleanor, and if there's anything I can do for you just let me know." With that she leaves. I glance anxiously up at Edward. He looks dreadful – haunted, even – like he hasn't slept for days. His hair is more disheveled than usual, he hasn't shaved for a long time and his shirt is badly creased. I frown.

"How are you feeling?" he whispers, siting down on the bed out of arm's reach.

"Confused. Achy. Hungry."

"Hungry?" He blinks in surprise.

I nod.

"What do you want to eat?"

"Anything. Soup."

He eases his BlackBerry out of his pants pocket and presses a number.

"Bella wants chicken soup… Good … Thank you." He hangs up.

"Taylor?"

Edward nods. He looks wide-eyed and wary, like I'm some kind of exotic beast about to flee. Eleanor returns with a pitcher of water and we both fall silent, gazing at each other as she pours out a glass and hands it to me.

"Small sips now," she warns.

"Yes ma'am," I mutter and take a welcome sip of cool water. *Oh my.* It tastes perfect. I take another, Edward watching me intently.

"Alice?" I ask.

"She's safe. Thanks to you."

"They did have her?"

"Yes."

All the madness was for a reason. Relief spirals through my body. Thank God, thank God, thank God she's okay. I frown.

"How did they get her?"

"Victoria," he says simply.

"No!"

He nods.

"She picked her up at Alice's gym."

I frown, still not understanding.

"Bella, I'll fill you in on the details later. Alice is fine, all things considered. She was drugged. She's groggy now and shaken up, but by some miracle she wasn't harmed." Edward's jaw clenches.

"What you did…" He runs his hand through his hair. "Was incredibly brave and incredibly stupid. You could have been killed." His eyes blaze a bleak forest green and I know he's restraining his anger.

"I didn't know what else to do," I whisper.

"You could have told me!" he says vehemently, his hands fisting in his lap.

"He said he'd kill her if I told anyone. I couldn't take that risk."

Edward closes his eyes, dread etched in his face.

"I have died a thousand deaths since Thursday."

Thursday?

"What day is it?"

"It's only just Saturday, nearly one in the morning." He checks his watch. "You've been unconscious for over twenty-four hours."

Oh.

"And James and Victoria?"

"In police custody. Although Smith is here, under guard. They had to remove the bullet you left in him," Edward says bitterly. "I don't know where in this hospital he is, fortunately, or I'd probably kill him myself." His face darkens.

Oh shit. James is here? 'That's for SIP you fucking bitch!'

I pale. My empty stomach convulses, tears prick my eyes, and a deep shudder runs through me.

"Hey." Edward scoots forward, his voice filled with concern. Taking the glass from my hand he tenderly folds me into his arms. "You're safe now," he murmurs against my hair, his voice hoarse.

"Edward, I'm so sorry." My tears start to fall.

"Hush." He strokes my hair, and I weep into his neck.

"And what I said. I was never going to leave you."

"Hush baby, I know."

"You do?" I gasp. This admission halts my tears.

"I worked it out. Eventually. Honestly Bella, what were you *thinking?*" His tone is restrained.

"You took me by surprise," I mutter into his shirt collar. "When we spoke at the bank. Thinking I was leaving you. I thought you knew me better. I've said to you over and over I would never leave."

"But after the way I've behaved – " His voice is barely audible, and his arms tighten around me. "I thought for a short time that I'd lost you."

"No, Edward. Never. I didn't want you to come and interfere."

He sighs, and I don't know if it's from anger, exasperation or hurt.

"How did you work it out?" I ask quickly, to distract him from his line of thought. I lean back to gaze at him. Reaching up he tucks my hair behind me ear.

"I'd just touched down in Seattle when the bank called. Last I'd heard you were ill and going home."

"So you were in Portland when Stuart called you?"

"We were just about to take off. I was worried about you," he says softly.

"You were?"

He frowns.

"Of course I was." He skirts his thumb over my bottom lip. "I spend my life worrying about you, you know that."

Oh Edward!

"James called me at the office," I murmur. "He gave me two hours to get the money." I shrug. "I had to leave, and it just seemed the best excuse."

Edward's mouth presses into a hard line.

"And you gave Stuart the slip. He's mad at you as well."

"As well?"

"As well as me."

I reach up and tentatively touch his face, running my fingers over his stubble. He closes his eyes, leaning into my fingers.

"Don't be mad at me – please," I whisper.

"I am so mad at you, Bella," he murmurs. "What you did was monumentally stupid. Bordering on insane."

"I told you, I didn't know what else to do."

"You don't seem to have any regard for your personal safety. And it's not just you now," he adds angrily. My lip trembles. He's thinking about our little Blip.

The door opens, startling us both, and a young African-American woman in a white coat over green scrubs strides in.

"Good evening, Mrs Cullen. I'm Doctor Bartley."

She starts to examine me thoroughly, shining a light in my eyes, making me touch her fingers, then my nose with first one eye then the other closed, and checking all my reflexes. But her voice is soft and her touch gentle; she has a warm bedside manner. Nurse Eleanor joins her to take my blood pressure and when she's finished, removes my IV. Edward wanders to the corner of the room while the two of them tend to me and makes some calls. It's hard to concentrate on Dr Bartley, Nurse Eleanor and Edward at the same time, but I hear him call his father, my mother and Rose to say I'm awake. Finally he leaves a message for Charlie.

Charlie. Oh shit… a vague memory of his voice comes back to me. He was here – yes, while I was still unconscious.

Dr Bartley checks around my ribs, her fingers probing gently but firmly.

I wince.

"These are bruised, not cracked or broken. You were very lucky, Mrs Cullen."

I scowl. *Lucky?* Not the word I would have chosen.

Edward scowls at her too. He mouths something at me… I think it's 'foolhardy' but I'm not sure.

"I'll prescribe you some painkillers. You'll need them for this and for the headache you must have. But all's looking as it should, Mrs Cullen. I suggest you get some sleep. Depending on how you feel in the morning, we may let you go home. My colleague Dr Singh will be attending you then."

"Okay. Thank you."

There's a knock on the door, and Taylor enters bearing a black cardboard box with 'Fairmont Olympic' emblazoned in cream on the side.

Holy cow!

Dr Bartley smiles and exits the room with Nurse Eleanor.

Edward pulls the wheeled tray over to me and Taylor places the box on it.

"Welcome back, Mrs Cullen," says Taylor.

"Hello, Taylor. Thank you."

"You're most welcome, ma'am." I think he wants to say more, but he holds fire.

Edward is unpacking the box, producing a thermos, soup bowl, side plate, linen napkin, soupspoon, a small basket of bread rolls, silver salt and pepper shakers… The Olympic has gone all-out.

"This is great, Taylor." My stomach is rumbling. I am famished.

"Will that be all?" he asks.

"Yes, thanks," Edward dismisses him.

Taylor nods.

"Taylor, thank you."

"Anything else I can get you, Mrs Cullen?"

I glance at Edward.

"Just some clean clothes for Edward."

Taylor smiles.

"Yes ma'am."

Edward glances down at his shirt, bemused.

"How long have you been wearing that shirt?" I ask.

"Since Thursday morning." He gives me crooked smile.

Taylor exits.

"Taylor's real pissed at you too," Edward adds casually, unscrewing the lid of the thermos and pouring creamy chicken soup into the bowl.

Oh no – not Taylor too! But I don't dwell on that, as my chicken soup is distracting me. It smells delicious, and steam curls invitingly from its surface. I take a taste… It's everything it promised to be.

"Good?" Edward asks, perching on the bed again.

I nod enthusiastically, and don't stop. My hunger feels primal. I pause only to wipe my mouth on the linen napkin.

"Tell me what happened. After you realized what was going on," I prompt him.

Edward runs his hand through his hair and shakes his head.

"Oh Bella, it's good to see you eat."

"I'm hungry. Tell me."

He frowns, recalling the painful memory.

"Well, after the bank called, and I thought my world had completely fallen apart – " He can't hide the pain in his voice.

I stop eating. *Oh shit.*

"Don't stop eating, or I'll stop talking," he whispers, his tone adamant. When I peek up at him he's glaring at me. Tentatively I continue with my soup. *Okay, okay…* Damn, it tastes good. Edward's gaze softens and after a beat he resumes.

"Anyway, shortly after you and I had finished our conversation, Taylor informed me that Smith had been granted bail. How, I don't know – I thought we'd managed to scupper that. So I thought about what you'd said… and I knew something was seriously wrong."

I blink at him.

"It was never about the money," I snap suddenly, an expected surge of anger flaring in my belly. My voice rises. "How could you even think that? It's never been about your fucking money!" My head starts to pound, and I wince. Edward gapes at me for a split second, surprised by my vehemence. He narrows his eyes.

"Mind your language," he growls. "Calm down and eat."

I glare mutinously at him.

"Bella," he warns.

"That hurt me more than anything, Edward," I whisper. "Almost as much as you seeing that woman."

He inhales sharply and his eyes widen, as if I've slapped him. He suddenly looks very tired. Closing his eyes briefly he shakes his head, resigned.

"I know," he sighs. "And I'm sorry. More than you know." His eyes are luminous with contrition. "Please, eat. While your soup is still hot." His voice is soft and compelling,

and I do as he asks, although I want to talk more about her and him. He breathes a sigh of relief.

"Go on," I whisper, between bites of the fresh white breadroll.

"We didn't know Alice was missing. I thought maybe he was blackmailing you or something. I called you back, but you didn't answer." He scowls. "I left you a message, then called Stuart. Taylor started tracking your cell. I knew you were at the bank so we headed straight there."

"I don't know how Stuart found me. Was he tracking my cell too?"

"The Saab is fitted with a tracking device. All our cars are."

Oh!

"By the time we got near the bank we saw you were already on the move – and we just followed. Why are you smiling?"

"On some level I knew you'd be stalking me."

"And that is amusing because?" he asks, appalled.

"James had instructed me to get rid of my cell. So I borrowed Whelan's cell, and that's the one I threw away. I put mine into one of the duffle bags so you could track your money."

Edward sighs.

"Our money, Bella," he says quietly. "Eat."

I wipe my soup bowl with the last of my bread and pop it into my mouth. For the first time in a long while I feel replete, in spite of our conversation.

"Finished," I murmur.

"Good girl."

There's a knock on the door and nurse Eleanor enters once more, carrying a small paper cup. Edward stands and clears away my plate, and starts putting all the items back into the box.

"Pain relief," smiles Eleanor, showing me the white pill in the paper cup.

"Is this okay to take? You know – with the baby?"

"Yes Mrs Cullen. It's Lortab – it's fine, it won't affect the baby."

I nod gratefully. My head really is pounding. I swallow it down with a sip of water.

"You ought to rest, Mrs Cullen," says Eleanor, looking pointedly at Edward.

He nods.

No!

"You're going?" I breathe. Panic is setting in. *Don't go – we've just started talking!*

Edward snorts.

"If you think for one moment I'm going to let you out of my sight, Mrs Cullen, you are very much mistaken."

Eleanor huffs slightly, but hovers over me and readjusts my pillows so that I have to lie down.

"Good night, Mrs Cullen," she says, and with one last censorious glance at Edward she leaves.

Edward raises an eyebrow as she closes the door.

"I don't think nurse Eleanor approves of me."

He walks over to me, but he looks tired, and I know I should try and persuade him to go home.

"You need to rest too, Edward. Go home. You look exhausted."

"I'm not leaving you. I'll doze in this armchair."

I scowl at him, then shift onto my side, grateful that the IV drip has gone.

"Sleep with me."

He frowns.

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't hurt me. Please, Edward."

He gazes at me, and I can tell he's tempted.

"Please." I lift up the blankets, inviting him into the bed.

"Fuck it," he mutters. He slips off his shoes and socks and gingerly clambers in beside me. Gently he wraps his arm around me, and I lay my head on his chest. He kisses my hair.

"I don't think Nurse Eleanor will be very happy with this arrangement," he whispers conspiratorially.

I giggle, then stop sharply as pain lances through my chest.

"Don't make me laugh. It hurts."

"Oh, but I love that sound," he says a little sadly, his voice low. "I'm sorry," he adds. He kisses my hair again and inhales deeply, and I don't know what he's apologizing for… making me laugh? Or the mess we're in? I rest my hand over his heart, and he places his hand on mine.

"You will tell me, won't you?" I breathe.

"Tell you what?"

"Why you went to see that woman."

"Oh Bella, can't we drop this? I regret it, okay?"

"I need to know."

"I'll tell you tomorrow," he mutters, irritated. "Oh – and Detective Clark wants to talk to you. Just routine. Now go to sleep."

He kisses my hair. I sigh heavily. I need to know why. At least he says he regrets it. That's something, my subconscious agrees. She's in an agreeable mood today, it seems. Ugh, Detective Clark. I shudder at the thought of reliving Thursday's events for him.

"Do we know why James was doing all this?" I murmur.

"Hmm," Edward murmurs. I'm soothed by the slowing fall and rise of his chest, gently rocking my head, lulling me to sleep as his breathing slows. And as I drift I try to make sense of the fragments of conversations I heard while I was on the edge of consciousness, but they slip and slide through my mind, remaining steadfastly elusive, taunting me from the edges of my memory. Oh, it's frustrating and exhausting… and in moments I'm asleep.

.

Nurse Eleanor's mouth is pursed and her arms folded in hostility. I hold my finger up to my lips.

"Please let him sleep," I whisper, blinking in the early morning light.

"This is your bed. Not his," she hisses sternly.

"I slept better because he was here." I insist, rushing to my husband's defense. Besides, it's true. Edward stirs, and Nurse Eleanor and I freeze. He mumbles in his sleep.

"Don't touch me. No more. Only Bella."

I frown. I have never heard Edward talk in his sleep. Admittedly that might be because he sleeps less than I do. I've only ever heard his nightmares. His arms tighten around me, squeezing me, and I wince.

"Mrs Cullen – " Nurse Eleanor glowers.

"Please," I beg.

She shakes her head, turns on her heel and leaves, and I snuggle up against Edward again.

.

When I wake, I'm alone. Edward is nowhere to be seen. The sun is blazing through the windows, and now I can really appreciate the room. I have flowers! I didn't notice them the night before. Several bouquets. I wonder idly who they're from.

A soft knock distracts me, and Carlisle peeks round the door. He beams when he sees that I'm awake.

"Can I come in?" he asks.

"Of course." I blink at him. He strides into the room and over to me, his soft gentle blue eyes assessing me shrewdly. He's wearing his white coat – he must be working. He surprises me by leaning down and kissing my forehead.

"May I sit?"

I nod, and he perches on the edge of the bed and takes my hand.

"I don't know how to thank you for my daughter, you crazy, brave, darling girl. What you did probably saved her life. I will be forever in your debt." His voice almost cracks, filled with gratitude and compassion.

Oh… I don't know what to say. I squeeze his hand but remain mute.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better. Sore," I add, for honesty's sake.

"Have they given you meds for the pain?"

"Lor… something."

"Lortab. Good. Where's Edward?"

"I don't know. When I woke he was gone."

"He won't be far away, I'm sure. He wouldn't leave you while you were unconscious."

"I know," I breathe.

"He's a little mad at you, as he should be," Carlisle smirks. Ah, this is where Edward gets it from.

"Edward is always mad at me."

"Is he?" Carlisle smiles, pleased, as if this is a good thing. His smile is infectious.

"How's Alice?"

His eyes cloud and he loses his smile.

"She's better. Mad as hell. I think anger is a healthy reaction to what happened to her."

"Is she here?"

"No, she's back at home. I don't think Esme will let her out of her sight."

"I know how that feels."

"You need watching too," he admonishes.

"Have you seen Charlie?" I change the subject.

"Yes. He's good. He's mad at you too. And I should be mad at you as well, but I'm not. I'll be forever grateful. But really, don't take any more silly risks with your life, or the life of my grandchild."

I flush. *He knows!*

"I read your chart, Bella. Congratulations."

"Um… thank you."

He gazes down at me, and his eyes soften, though he frowns at my expression.

"Edward will come round," he says gently. "This will be the best thing for him. Just – give him some time."

I nod. Oh… they've spoken.

"I'd better go, start my rounds. Instill the fear of God in my interns." He grins wickedly, and rises. "I'll check in on you later. Doctor Singh knows what she's doing."

He leans down and kisses me once more.

"I mean it, Bella. I can never repay what you've done for us. Thank you."

I blink up at him, suddenly overwhelmed, and he strokes my cheek affectionately. Then he turns on his heels and leaves.

Oh my. I'm reeling from his gratitude. Perhaps now I can let the pre-nup debacle go. My subconscious nods sagely, in agreement with me yet again. I shake my head, and gingerly clamber out of bed. I'm relieved to find that I am much steadier on my feet than yesterday. In spite of Edward sharing the bed I have slept well and feel refreshed. My head still aches, but it's a dull nagging pain, nothing like the pounding yesterday. I'm stiff and sore, but I just need a bath. I feel grimy. I head into the ensuite.

.

"BELLA!" Edward shouts.

"I'm in the ensuite," I call as I finish brushing my teeth. That feels better. I ignore my reflection in the mirror – Jeez, I look a mess. When I open the door Edward is by the bed,

holding a tray of food. He's transformed. Dressed entirely in black, he's shaved, showered and looks well rested.

"Good morning, Mrs Cullen," he says brightly. "I have your breakfast."

He looks so boyish and young. Wow. I can't help smiling broadly at him as I clamber back into bed. He pulls over the tray on wheels and lifts the cover to reveal my breakfast; oatmeal with dried fruits, pancakes with bacon and maple syrup, orange juice and Twinings breakfast tea. My mouth waters – I am so hungry. I down the orange juice in a few gulps and tuck into the oatmeal. Edward sits down on the edge of the bed to watch. He smirks at me.

"What?" I ask, with my mouth full.

"I like to see you eat," he says. But I don't think that's what he's smirking about. "How are you feeling?"

"Better. Sore," I mutter between mouthfuls.

"I've never seen you eat like this."

I glance up at him, and my heart sinks. We have to address the very tiny elephant in the room.

"It's because I'm pregnant, Edward."

He snorts, and his mouth twists into an ironic smile.

"If I knew getting you knocked up was going to make you eat, I might have done it earlier."

"Edward Cullen!" I gasp and push the oatmeal away.

"Don't stop eating," he warns.

"Edward, we need to talk about this." His eyes widen and he stills.

"What's there to say? We're going to be parents." He shrugs, desperately trying to look nonchalant, but all I can see is his fear. Pushing the tray aside I crawl over the bed to him and take his hands in mine.

"You're scared," I whisper. "I get it."

He nods almost imperceptibly, his eyes impossibly wide, all his earlier boyishness stripped away.

"I am too. That's normal." My voice is soft and cajoling.

"What kind of father could I possibly be?" His voice is hoarse, barely audible.

"Oh Edward," I stifle a sob. "One that tries his best. That's all any of us can do."

"Bella – I don't know if I can…"

"Of course you can. You're loving, you're fun, you're strong, you'll set boundaries. Our child will want for nothing."

He's frozen, gazing at me, doubt etched on his beautiful face.

"Yes, it would have been ideal to have waited. To have longer, just the two of us. But we'll be three of us, and we'll all grow up together. We'll be a family. Our own family. And your child will love you unconditionally, like I do." Tears spring to my eyes.

"Oh Bella," Edward whispers, his voice anguished and pained. "I thought I'd lost you. Then I thought I'd lost you again. Seeing you lying on the ground, pale and cold and unconscious – it was all my worst fears realized. And now here you are – brave and strong… giving me hope. Loving me, after all that I've done."

"Yes I do love you, Edward, desperately. I always will."

Gently taking my head between his hands he wipes my tears away with his thumbs. He gazes into my eyes, green to brown, and all I see is his fear and wonder and love.

"I love you too," he breathes. And he bends and kisses me, sweetly, tenderly, like a man who adores his wife.

"I'll try," he whispers against my lips.

"You'll try, and you'll succeed. And let's face it, you don't have much choice in the matter, because Blip and I are not going anywhere."

"Blip?"

"Blip."

He raises his eyebrows.

"I'm more partial to Junior."

"Junior it is, then."

He smiles his shy smile, and kisses me once more.

Chapter 115/28

"Much as I'd like to kiss you all day, your breakfast is getting cold," Edward murmurs against my lips. He gazes down at me, now amused, except his eyes are darker… sensual. Holy cow, he's switched again. My Mr Mercurial.

"Eat," he orders, his voice soft. I swallow, a reaction to his smoldering look, and crawl back into bed. He pushes the tray in front of me. The oatmeal is cold, but the pancakes under the cover are fine – in fact they're mouthwatering.

"You know," I mutter between mouthfuls, "Junior might be a girl."

Edward's eyes widen and he runs his hand through his hair.

"Two women, eh?" Alarm flashes across his face, and his dark look vanishes.

Oh crap.

"Do you have a preference?"

"Preference?"

"Boy or Girl."

He frowns.

"Healthy will do," he says, but he's disconcerted by the question. "Eat," he snaps, and I know he's trying to avoid the subject.

"I'm eating, I'm eating… Jeez, keep your hair on, Cullen." I watch him carefully. The corners of his eyes are crinkled with worry. He's said he'll try, but I know he's still freaked out by the baby. *Oh Edward, so am I. I'm sorry.* He sits down in the armchair beside me, picking up the Seattle Times.

"You made the papers again, Mrs Cullen," he mutters, his tone bitter.

"Again? No!"

"The hacks are just rehashing yesterday's story, but it seems factually accurate. You want to read it?"

I shake my head.

"Read it to me. I'm eating."

He smirks and proceeds to read the article aloud. It's a report on James and Victoria depicting them as a modern-day Bonnie and Clyde. It briefly covers Alice's kidnap, my involvement in Alice's rescue, and the fact that both James and I are in the same hospital. How does the press get all this information? I must ask Rose. Edward finishes. Like he said, the article reveals nothing new.

"Please read something else. I like listening to you."

He obliges, and reads me a report about the Microsoft CEO taking a pay hike when the company's profits have declined. Edward is obviously disgusted. But listening to his soothing voice as I eat, secure in the knowledge that I am fine, Alice is fine, and Blip – um, Junior – is fine, I feel a precious moment of peace… in spite of all that has happened over the last few days.

I understand that Edward is scared about the baby, but I don't understand the depth of his fear. I resolve to try and talk to him some more about this. See if I can put his mind to rest. What puzzles me is that he hasn't lacked for positive role models as parents. Both Esme and Carlisle are exemplary parents, or so they seem. Maybe it was the bitch troll's interference that damaged him so badly. I'd like to think so. But in truth I think it goes back to his birth mom, though I'm sure Mrs Robinson didn't help. I halt my thoughts as I nearly recall a whispered conversation. Damn! It hovers on the edge of my memory, from when I was unconscious… Edward talking with Esme. It melts away into the shadows of my mind. Oh, it's so frustrating. *Damn*.

I wonder if Edward will ever volunteer the reason he went to see her, or if I'll have to push him. I'm about to ask, when there's a knock on the door.

Detective Clark makes an apologetic entry into the room. He's right to be apologetic – my heart sinks when I see him.

"Mr Cullen, Mrs Cullen. Am I interrupting?"

"Yes," snaps Edward.

Clark ignores him.

"Glad to see you're awake, Mrs Cullen. I need to ask you a few questions about Thursday afternoon. Just routine. Is now a convenient time?"

"Sure," I mumble. I do not want to relive Thursday's events.

"My wife should be resting." Edward bristles.

"I'll be brief, Mr Cullen, it won't take long. And it means I'll be out of your hair sooner rather than later."

Edward stands and offers Clark his chair, then sits down beside me on the bed and takes my hand, squeezing it reassuringly.

.

Half an hour later, Clark is done. I've learned nothing new, but I have recounted the events of Thursday to him in a halting, quiet voice, watching Edward go pale and grimace at some parts.

"I wish she'd aimed higher."

"Might have done womankind a service if Mrs Cullen had," Clark agrees.

What?

"Thank you, Mrs Cullen, that's all for now."

"You won't let him out again, will you?"

"I don't think he'll make bail this time, ma'am."

"Do we know who posted his bail last time?" Edward asks.

"No sir. It was anonymous."

Edward frowns, but I think he has his suspicions.

Clark rises to leave just as Dr Singh and two interns enter the room.

.

After a thorough examination, Dr Singh declares me fit to go home. Edward sags with relief.

"Mrs Cullen, you'll have to watch for worsening headaches and blurry vision. If anything like that happens you must return to the hospital immediately."

I nod, trying to contain my delight at going home.

As Dr Singh leaves Edward asks her for a quick word in the corridor. He keeps the door ajar as he asks her a question. She smiles up at him.

"Yes, Mr Cullen, that's fine."

He grins, and returns to the room a happier man.

"What was all that about?" I ask, perplexed.

"Sex," he says, flashing me a wicked grin.

Oh. I flush.

"And?"

"You're good to go." He smirks.

Oh Edward!

"I have a headache." I smirk right back at him.

"I know. You'll be safe for a while. I was just checking."

Safe? I frown at the momentary stab of disappointment I feel. I'm not sure I want to be safe.

"Shall I take you home?"

"I'd like to see Charlie first."

"Sure."

"Does he know about the baby?"

"I thought you'd want to be the one to tell him. I haven't told your Mom either."

"Thank you." I smile up at him, grateful that he hasn't stolen my thunder.

"My dad knows," Edward adds. "He saw your chart. I told my Mom, but no one else. Mom said couples normally wait for twelve weeks or so… to be sure." He shrugs.

"I'm not sure I'm ready to tell Charlie."

"I should warn you, he's mad as hell. Said I should spank you."

What? Edward laughs at my appalled expression.

"I told him I'd be only too willing to oblige."

"You didn't!" I gasp.

He winks at me.

"Here, Taylor bought you some clean clothes. I'll help you dress."

.

As Edward predicted, Charlie is furious. I don't remember him ever being this mad. Edward has wisely decided to leave us alone together. For such a taciturn man Charlie does not let me say a word in my defense, but continues to berate me for my irresponsible behavior.

Oh Daddy, please calm down – your blood pressure is not up to this.

"And I've had to deal with your mother," he growls with fury, waving both of his hands in exasperation. I feel twelve years old again.

Oh Jeez… I must call her.

"Dad, I'm sorry."

"And poor Edward! I've never seen him like that. He's aged. We've both aged years over the last couple of days."

"Charlie, I'm sorry."

"You should call your mother."

I lean over and kiss his cheek, and he finally relents in his tirade.

"I really am sorry. But thank you for teaching me to shoot," I whisper. For a moment he regards me with ill-concealed paternal pride.

"I'm glad you can shoot straight," he says, his voice gruff. "Now go on home and get some rest."

"You look well, Dad." I try to change the subject.

"You look pale." His fear is suddenly evident. His look mirrors Edward's from last night, and I grasp his hand.

"I'm okay. I promise I won't do that again."

He squeezes my hand and pulls me into a tight hug.

"If anything happened to you…" he whispers, his voice hoarse and low. Tears prick my eyes. I am not used to displays of emotion from my father.

"Dad, I'm good. Nothing that a hot shower won't cure."

.

We head out of the hospital's rear exit to avoid the paps gathered at the entrance. Taylor leads the way to where Stuart is waiting in the SUV.

Edward is quiet as Stuart drives us home. I avoid Stuart's gaze in the rear view mirror, embarrassed that the last time I saw him was at the bank – when I gave him the slip. I call my Mom, who sobs down the phone at me.

"Mom! I'm fine."

"Edward told me you were unconscious," she wails.

"Briefly. Mom, really – it's all good."

"What were you *thinking*? You shot someone! Edward says you saved his sister."

"I'm not sure I'd put it quite like that, but Alice is safe." It takes most of the journey home to calm her down, but I succeed, by promising that we'll visit soon. Throughout my conversation with her Edward holds my hand, brushing his thumb across my knuckles. He's nervous… something's happened.

"What's wrong?" I ask when I'm finally free from my mother.

"Jenks wants to see me."

"Jenks? Your security guy?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"He's found something out about that fucker Smith." Edward's lip curls into a snarl, and a frisson of fear passes through me. "He didn't want to tell me on the phone."

"Oh."

"He's coming here this afternoon, from Detroit."

"You think he's found a connection?"

Edward nods.

"What do you think it is?"

"I have no idea." Edward's brow furrows, perplexed.

Taylor draws up outside the entrance to Escala, and Edward ushers me out of the car. Keeping his arm around my waist he leads me to the waiting elevator.

"Glad to be home?" he asks.

"Yes," I whisper. But as I stand in the familiar surroundings of the elevator the enormity of what I've been through crashes over me, and I start to shake.

"Hey – " Edward wraps his arms around me and pulls me close. "You're home. You're safe," he breathes, kissing my hair.

"Oh Edward," I sob. And a dam I didn't even know was in place bursts, and I start to sob.

"Hush now," Edward whispers, cradling my head against his chest. But it's too late – I sob, overwhelmed, into his t-shirt, recalling James's vicious attack – *'That's for SIP, you fucking bitch!'* Telling Edward I was leaving – *'You're leaving me?'* And my fear, my gut-wrenching fear for Alice, for myself… and for Blip.

When the doors of the elevator slide open Edward picks me up like a child and carries me into the foyer. I wrap my arms around his neck and cling to him, weeping.

He carries me through to our bathroom and deposits me on the chair.

"Bath?" he asks. I shake my head. No… no… not like Lauren. "Shower?" His voice is choked with concern. Through my tears I nod. I want to wash away the grime of the last few days, wash away the memory of James's attack. *'You gold digging whore – '*

I sob into my hands as the sound of the water cascading from the shower echoes off the walls.

"Hey," Edward croons. Kneeling in front of me he pulls my hands away from my tear-stained cheeks and cups his hands around my face. I gaze at him, blinking away my tears.

"You're safe. You both are," he whispers.

Blip and me. My eyes brim with tears again.

"Stop, now. I can't bear it when you cry." His voice is hoarse. His thumbs wipe my cheeks, but my tears still flow.

"I'm sorry, Edward. Just sorry, for everything. For making you worry, for risking everything – for the things I said."

"Hush, baby, please." He kisses my forehead. "It takes two to tango, Bella." He gives me a crooked smile. "Well that's what my mom always says. I said things and did things I'm not proud of." His green eyes blaze contritely. "Let's get you undressed." His voice is soft. I wipe my nose with the back of my hand and he kisses my forehead once more.

Briskly he strips me, taking particular care as he pulls my t-shirt over my head. But my head is not too sore. Leading me to the shower he peels off his own clothing in record time, allowing him to step into the welcome hot water with me. He pulls me into his arms and holds me, holds me for the longest time, as the water gushes over us, soothing us both. He lets me cry into his chest. Occasionally he kisses my hair, but he doesn't let go, he just rocks me gently beneath the shower. To feel his skin against mine, his chest hair against my cheek… this man I love, this flawed, beautiful man, the man I could have lost through my own recklessness. I feel empty and aching at the thought. But he's here, still here – in spite of all that's happened. He has some explaining to do, but right now I want to revel in the feel of his comforting, protective arms around me. And in that moment it occurs to me… any explanations on his part have to come from him. I can't force him – he's got to want to tell me. I don't want to be cast as the nagging wife, constantly trying to wheedle information out of her husband. It's just exhausting. I know he loves me. I know he loves me more than he's ever loved anyone, and for now, that's enough. The realization is liberating. I stop crying and step back.

"Better?" he asks.

I nod.

"Good. Let me look at you," he breathes and for a moment I don't know what he means. But he takes my hand and examines the arm I fell on when James hit me. There are bruises on my shoulder and at my elbow and wrist. He kisses each of them. Reaching up he grabs a washcloth and body wash from the rack, and the sweet familiar scent of jasmine fills my nostrils.

"Turn around," he whispers. Gently he proceeds to wash my injured arm. Then he moves on to my neck, my shoulders, my back and my other arm. He stops, moves me sideways, and traces his long fingers down my side. I wince as they skate over the large bruise at my

hip. Edward's eyes harden and his lips thin. His anger is palpable. He whistles through his teeth.

"It doesn't hurt," I whisper, to reassure him.

Blazing green eyes meet mine.

"I want to kill him. I nearly did," he adds cryptically. I frown. His expression makes me shiver. He reaches up for the body wash once more, and with tender, aching gentleness, he washes my side, then my behind, then kneeling moves down my legs. He pauses to examine my bruised knee. He lips brush over the bruise before he returns to washing my legs and my feet. Reaching down I caress his head, running my fingers through his wet hair. He stands up again, and his fingers trace the outline of the bruise on my ribs where James kicked me.

"Oh baby," he groans, his voice filled with anguish, his eyes bleak with fury.

"I'm okay," I whisper. Leaning up I pull his lips to mine and kiss him. He's hesitant to reciprocate, but as my tongue meets his, his body stirs against me.

"No," he whispers against my lips, and he pulls back. "Let's get you clean." His face is serious. Damn… he means it. I pout, and the atmosphere between us lightens in an instant. He grins and kisses me briefly.

"Clean," he emphasizes. "Not dirty."

"I like dirty."

"Me too, Mrs Cullen. But not now, not here." He grabs the shampoo, and before I can persuade him otherwise he's washing my hair.

.

Actually I love clean too. I feel refreshed and reinvigorated, and I don't know if it's from the shower, the crying or my decision to stop hassling Edward about everything. He wraps me in a large towel, and drapes one around his hips while I gingerly dry my hair. My head aches, but it's a dull persistent pain that is more than manageable – in fact I hardly notice it. I have some painkillers from Dr Singh, but she's asked me not to use them unless I have to.

As I dry my hair I think about Victoria.

"I still don't understand why Victoria was involved with James."

"I do," Edward mutters darkly.

Oh! This is news. I gaze up at him, but I'm distracted. He's drying his hair with a towel, his chest and shoulders still wet with beads of water that glint beneath the halogens. He pauses and smirks at me.

"Enjoying the view?"

"How do you know?" I ask, flushing. Caught staring at my own husband.

"That you're enjoying the view?" he teases.

"No." My cheeks heat. "About Victoria."

"Detective Clark hinted at it."

I give him my tell-me-more expression, and another nagging memory from when I was unconscious resurfaces. Yes… Clark was in my room. I wish I could remember what he said.

"Smith has tapes. Tapes of all of them," Edward says.

What? I frown, my clean skin tightening across my forehead.

"Videotapes, of him fucking her. Fucking all his PAs."

Oh! I blink in shock.

"Exactly. Blackmail material. He likes it rough." Edward frowns and I watch confusion followed by disgust cross his face. I flush. Of course – Edward likes it rough too. He pales as his disgust turns to self-loathing.

"Don't." The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. His frown deepens.

"Don't what?" He stills and regards me with… fear?

"Don't think you're anything like him."

Edward's eyes widen, but he says nothing – confirming that's exactly what he was thinking.

"You're not." My voice is adamant.

"We're cut from the same cloth," he murmurs.

"No you're not," I snap, though I understand why he might think so. I remember the information Edward revealed on the plane to Aspen: '*His dad died in a brawl in a bar. His mother drank herself into oblivion. He was in and out of foster homes as a kid, in and out of trouble too – mainly boosting cars. Spent time in juvie.'*

"You both have troubled pasts, and you were both born in Detroit. That's it, Edward." I fist my hands on my hips.

"Bella, your faith in me is touching, in spite of the last few days. We'll know more when Jenks is here." He's dismissing the subject.

"Edward – " He stops me with a kiss, and I recall the promise I made to myself not to hassle him for information.

"Enough," he breathes. "And don't pout," he adds. "Come. Let me dry your hair." I know the conversation is over.

.

I sit between Edward's legs in sweatpants and t-shirt as he dries my hair.

"So did Clark tell you anything else while I was unconscious?"

"Not that I recall."

"I heard a few of your conversations."

The hairbrush stills in my hair.

"Did you?" he asks, his tone nonchalant.

"Yes. My dad, your dad, Detective Clark… your mom."

"And Rose?"

"Rose was there?"

"Briefly, yes. She's mad at you too."

I turn in his lap.

"Stop with the 'everyone is mad at Bella' crap, okay?"

"Just telling you the truth." Edward blinks, bemused by my outburst.

"Yes it was reckless, but you know – your sister was in danger."

His face falls.

"Yes. She was." Switching off the hairdryer he puts it down on the bed beside him. He grasps my chin.

"Thank you," he says, surprising me. "But no more recklessness. Because next time, I will spank the living shit out of you."

I gasp.

"You wouldn't!"

"I would." He's serious. Holy cow. Deadly serious. "I have your father's permission," he smirks. He's teasing me! When I launch myself at him he twists, so that I fall onto the bed and into his arms. I wince as I land at the stab of pain from my ribs. Edward pales.

"Behave!" he admonishes, and for a moment he's angry.

"Sorry," I mumble, reaching up to caress his cheek. He nuzzles my hand and kisses it gently.

"Honestly Bella, you really have no regard for your own safety." His hand tugs up the hem of my t-shirt, then rests on my belly. I stop breathing.

"It's not just you anymore," he whispers. His fingertips trail along the waistband of my sweats. Desire explodes, unexpected, hot and heavy in my blood. I gasp and Edward tenses, halting his fingers and gazing down at me. He moves his hand up to tuck a stray lock of my hair behind my ear.

"No," he whispers.

What?

"Don't look at me like that. I've seen the state you're in. And the answer's no." His voice is firm, and he kisses my forehead. I squirm.

"Edward," I whine.

"No. Get into bed." He sits up.

"Bed?"

"You need rest."

"I need you," I whisper.

He closes his eyes and shakes his head, as if it's a great effort of will. When he opens them again his eyes are glowing with resolve.

"Just do as you're told, Bella."

I'm tempted to take off all my clothes, but then I remember the bruises, and know I won't win that way. Reluctantly I nod.

"Okay." I deliberately give him an exaggerated pout.

He grins, amused.

"I'll bring you some lunch."

"You're going to cook?" I nearly expire. He has the grace to laugh.

"I'm going to heat something up. Mrs Cope has been working overtime."

"Edward, I'll do it. I'm fine. Jeez, I want sex – I can certainly cook." I sit up awkwardly, trying to hide my flinch from my smarting ribs.

"BED!" Edward's eyes flash and he points to the pillow.

"Join me," I murmur, wishing I was wearing something a little more alluring than sweatpants and t-shirt.

"Bella, get into bed. Now."

I scowl, stand up and drop my pants. He pulls the duvet back, and I slip into bed, abandoning my sweat pants on the floor.

"You heard Dr Singh. She said rest." His voice is gentler. I fold my arms in frustration, and he smirks. "Stay," he warns.

.

Mrs Cope's chicken stew is, without doubt, one of my favorite dishes. Edward eats with me, sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed.

"That was very well heated." I smirk at him and he grins. I'm replete and sleepy. Was this his plan?

"You look tired," he says, picking up my tray.

"I am."

"Good. Sleep." He leans down and kisses me. "I have some work I need to do. I'll do it in here if that's okay with you."

I nod… fighting a losing battle with my eyelids. I had no idea chicken stew could be so exhausting.

.

It's dusk when I wake. Pale pink light floods the room. Edward is sitting in the armchair, watching me, green eyes luminous in the ambient light. He's clutching some papers. His face is ashen.

Holy cow!

"What's wrong?" I ask immediately, sitting up.

"Jenks has just left," he says.

Oh shit.

"And?"

"I lived with the fucker," he whispers.

"Lived? With James?"

He nods, eyes wide. I shuffle over and pull the duvet back, inviting him into bed beside me – and to my surprise he doesn't hesitate. He kicks off his shoes and slides in alongside me. Wrapping one arm around me he curls up, resting his head in my lap. I'm stunned. *What's this?*

"I don't understand," I murmur, running my fingers through his hair, gazing down at him. Edward closes his eyes, and his brow furrows, as if he's straining to remember.

"After I was found with the crack whore, before I went to live with Carlisle and Esme, I was in the care of Michigan State. I lived in a foster home. But I can't remember anything about that time."

My mind is reeling. A foster home? This is news to both of us.

"For how long?" I whisper.

"Two months or so. I have no recollection."

"Have you spoken to your Mom and Dad about it?"

"No."

"Perhaps you should. Maybe they could fill in the blanks."

He hugs me tightly.

"Here." He hands me the papers, which turn out to be two photographs. Reaching over I switch on the bedside light to examine them in detail. The first photo is of a shabby house with a yellow front door and a large gabled window in the roof. It has a porch, but the best that can be said of it is that it's unremarkable. The second photo is of a family – at first glance, an ordinary family – a man and his wife, I think, and their children. The couple are both dressed in dowdy, over-washed blue t-shirts. They must be in their forties. The woman has pulled-back blonde hair and the man a severe buzz-cut, and they are both smiling warmly at the camera. The man has his hand draped over the shoulders of a sullen teenage girl. I gaze at each of the children: two boys – twins, about twelve, I think – both with sandy blond hair, grinning broadly at the camera; another boy, smaller, blonder, scowling; and hiding behind him, a copper-haired green-eyed little boy. Wide-eyed and scared, dressed in mismatched clothes, and clutching a child's dirty blanket. *Fuck. It's Edward.*

"This is you," I whisper, my heart lurching into my throat. I know Edward was four when his mother died. But this child looks so much younger. He must have been severely malnourished. I stifle a sob as tears spring to my eyes. *Oh, my sweet Fifty.*

Edward nods.

"That's me."

"Jenks brought these photos?"

"Yes. I don't remember any of this." His voice is flat and lifeless.

"Remember being with foster parents? Why should you? Edward, it was a long time ago. Is this what's worrying you?"

"I remember other things, from before and after. When I met my Mom and Dad. But this… It's like there's a huge chasm."

My heart twists, and understanding dawns. My darling control freak likes everything in its place – and now he's learned he's missing part of the jigsaw.

"Is James in this picture?"

"Yes, he's the older kid." Edward's eyes are still screwed shut, and he's clinging to me like I'm a life raft. I run my fingers through his hair while I gaze at the older boy glaring, defiant and arrogant, at the camera. I can see it's James. But he's just a kid, a sad eight or nine year old, hiding his fear behind his hostility. A thought occurs to me.

"When James called to tell me had Alice – he said if things had been different, it could have been him."

Edward closes his eyes and shudders.

"That fucker!" he growls.

"You think he did all this because the Cullens adopted you instead of him?"
"Who knows?" Edward's tone is bitter. "I don't give a fuck about him."

"Perhaps he knew we were seeing each other, when I went for that job interview. Perhaps he planned to seduce me all along." Bile rises in my throat.

"I don't think so," Edward mutters, his eyes now open. "The searches he did on my family didn't start until a week or so after you began your job at SIP. Barney knows the exact dates. And Bella, he fucked all his assistants and taped them." Edward closes his eyes and tightens his grip on me once more. Suppressing the tremor that runs through me I try to recall my various conversations with James when I first started at SIP. I knew deep down he was bad news, yet I ignored all my instincts. Edward's right – I have no regard for my own safety. I remember the fight we had about me going to New York with James. Jeez – I could have ended up on some sordid sex tape. The thought is nauseating. And in that moment I recall the photographs Edward kept of his submissives. Oh shit. *'We're cut from the same cloth.'* No, Edward, you're not, you're nothing like him. He's still curled around me, like a small boy.

"Edward, I think you should talk to your Mom and Dad." I am reluctant to move him, so I shift and slide back into the bed until we are eye to eye.

A bewildered green gaze meets mine, reminding me of the child in the photograph.

"Let me call them," I whisper. He shakes his head. "Please," I beg. Edward stares at me, pain and self-doubt reflected in his eyes, as he considers my request. *Oh Edward, please!*

"I'll call them," he whispers.

"Good. We can go and see them together, or you can go. Whichever you prefer."

"No. They can come here."

"Why?"

"I don't want you going anywhere."

"Edward, I'm up for a car journey."

"No." His voice is firm, but he gives me an ironic smile. "Anyway it's Saturday night, they're probably at some function."

"Call them. This news has obviously upset you. They might be able to shed some light." I glance at the radio alarm. It's coming up to seven in the evening. He regards me impassively for a moment.

"Okay," he says, as if I've issued him with a challenge. Sitting up he reaches for the bedside phone. I wrap my arm around him and rest my head on his chest as he makes the call.

"Dad?" I register his surprise that Carlisle has answered the phone. "Bella's good. We're home. Jenks has just left. He found out the connection… the foster home in Detroit… I don't remember any of that." Edward's voice is almost inaudible as he mutters the last sentence. My heart constricts once more. I hug him, and he squeezes my shoulder.

"Yeah… You will? … Great." He hangs up.

"They're on their way." He sounds surprised, and I realize in that moment that he's probably never asked them for help.

"Good. I should get dressed."

Edward's arm tightens around me.

"Don't go," he murmurs.

"Okay," I whisper. I snuggle into his side again, stunned by the fact that he's just told me a great deal about himself – entirely voluntarily.

.

As we stand at the threshold to the great room Esme wraps me in her arms.

"Bella, Bella, darling Bella," she whispers. "Saving two of my children – how can I ever thank you?"

I flush, touched and embarrassed in equal measure by her words. Carlisle hugs me too, kissing my forehead. Then Alice grabs me, crushing my ribs. I wince and gasp, but she doesn't notice.

"Thank you for saving me from those assholes."

Edward scowls at her.

"Alice! Let her go – she's sore."

"Oh! Sorry," she mumbles.

"I'm good," I mutter, relieved when she releases me. She looks fine. Impeccably dressed as usual, in tight black jeans and a pale pink frilly blouse. I'm glad I'm wearing my comfortable wrap dress and flats – at least I look reasonably presentable.

Dancing over to Edward Alice curls her arm around his waist. Wordlessly he hands Esme the photo. She gasps, her hand flying to her mouth to contain her emotion, as she instantly recognizes Edward. Carlisle wraps his arm around her shoulder as he too examines it.

"Oh darling," Esme breathes, reaching up to caress Edward's cheek.

Taylor appears.

"Mr Cullen? Miss Hale, her brother and your brother are heading up, sir." Edward frowns.

"Thank you, Taylor" he mutters, bemused.

"I called Jasper and told him we were coming over." Alice grins. "It's a party." I sneak a sympathetic glance at my poor husband as both Esme and Carlisle glare at Alice in exasperation.

"We'd better get some food together," I declare. "Alice, will you give me a hand?" I usher her towards the kitchen area as Edward leads his parents into his study.

.

Rose is apoplectic with righteous indignation that's aimed at me, Edward and most of all James and Victoria.

"What were you *thinking*, Bella?" she shouts as she confronts me in the kitchen, causing all eyes in the room to turn and stare.

"Rose, please – I've had the same lecture from everyone!" I snap back. She glowers at me, and for one minute I think I'm going to be subjected to a Rosalie Hale how-not-to-succumb-to-kidnappers lecture, but instead she folds me into her arms.

"Jeez – sometimes you don't have the brains you were born with, Swan," she whispers. As she kisses my cheek there are tears in her eyes. *Rose!* "I've been so worried about you."

"Don't cry. You'll set me off."

She stands back and wipes her eyes, embarrassed. Then takes a deep breath and composes herself.

"On a more positive note," she says shifting gear. "We've set a date for our wedding. I thought next May? And of course I want you to be my matron of honor."

"Oh… Rose… Wow. Congratulations!"

Crap – Li'l Blip… Junior!

"What is it?" she asks, misinterpreting my alarm.

"Um… I'm just so happy for you. Some good news for a change." I wrap my arms around her and pull her into a hug. Shit, shit, *shit*. When is Blip due? Mentally I calculate my due date. Dr Greene said I was four or five weeks. So – sometime in May? *Shit.*

Emmett hands me a glass of champagne.

Oh. Shit.

Edward emerges from his study, looking ashen, and follows his parents into the great room. His eyes widen when he sees the glass in my hand.

"Rose," he greets her coolly.

"Edward." She is equally cool.

I sigh.

"Your meds, Mrs Cullen," he warns, eyeing the glass in my hand. I narrow my eyes. *Dammit. I want a drink.* Carlisle smiles gently as he joins me in the kitchen, collecting a glass from Emmett on the way.

"A few sips will be fine," he whispers with a conspiratorial wink at me, and lifts his glass to clink mine. I grin at him – I have gained an ally. Edward scowls at both of us, until Emmett distracts him with news of the Mariners' 3-2 victory over the Yankees.

"How is he?" I whisper to Carlisle, as he and I stand in the kitchen watching the Cullens lounge on the sofa – Alice and Jasper and Rose and Emmett together side by side, Edward taking a seat beside Emmett while Esme sits down beside Alice and takes her hand.

"Shaken," Carlisle murmurs to me, his brow furrowing, his face serious. "He remembers so much of his life with his birth mother – many things I wish he didn't. But this…" He stops. "I hope we've helped. I'm glad he called us. He said you told him to." Carlisle's gaze softens. I shrug and take a hasty sip of champagne.

"You're very good for him. He doesn't listen to anyone else."

I blink up at Carlisle, frowning. I don't think that's true. The unwelcome specter of the bitch troll looms into my mind. I know Edward talks to Esme too – I heard him. Again I feel a moment's frustration, as I try to grasp their conversation in the hospital, but it still eludes me.

"Come and sit down, Bella. You look tired. I'm sure you weren't expecting all of us here this evening."

"It's great to see everyone," I smile. Because it's true – it's great. I'm an only child who has married into a large and gregarious family, and I love it. I snuggle up next to Edward.

"One glass," he hisses at me.

"Yes sir." I bat my lashes, disarming him completely. He puts his arm around my shoulders and returns to his baseball conversation with Emmett and Jasper.

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"My parents think you walk on water," Edward mutters as he drags off his t-shirt.

I'm curled up in bed watching the floorshow.

"Good thing you know differently." I snort.

"Oh, I don't know," he murmurs, as he slips out of his jeans.

"Did they fill in the gaps for you?"

"Some. I lived with the Sangsters for three months while Mom and Dad waited for the adoption to go through. They were already approved adopters because of Emmett, but the wait's required by law. To see if I had any living relatives who wanted to claim me."

Oh.

"How do you feel about that?" I whisper.

He frowns.

"About having no living relatives? Fuck that. If they were anything like the crack-whore…" He shakes his head in disgust.

Oh Edward! You were a child… you loved your mom.

He slides on his pjs, climbs into bed and gently pulls me into his arms.

"It's coming back to me. I remember the food. I think Mrs Sangster could cook. And at least we know now why that fucker is so hung up on my family." He runs his free hand through his hair.

"Will you tell the police?"

"Already have. Christ knows what Clark will do with that information. Anyway, thank you for this evening."

"Thank you? For what?"

"Catering for my family at a moment's notice."

"Don't thank me, thank Mrs Cope. She keeps the pantry well-stocked."

He shakes his head as if in exasperation. At me? Why?

"How are you feeling, Mrs Cullen?"

Oh!

"Good." I trail my fingers down his stomach to his oh-so happy trail.

He laughs and grabs my hand.

"Oh no. Don't get any ideas."

I pout, and he sighs.

"Bella, Bella, Bella, what am I going to do with you?" He kisses my hair.

"I have some ideas." I squirm beside him, and wince as pain radiates through my upper body from my bruised ribs.

"Baby, you've been through enough. Besides, I have a bedtime story for you."

Oh?

"You wanted to know…" He tails off, closes his eyes and swallows. All of the hair on my body stands on end. *Shit*.

"Picture this," he begins, his voice soft. "An adolescent boy looking to earn some extra money so he can continue his secret drinking habit." He shifts onto his side so that we're lying facing each other and he's gazing into my eyes.

"So I was in the back yard at the Lincoln's, clearing some rubble and trash from the extension Mr Lincoln had just added to their place…"

Holy fuck… he's talking.

Chapter 116/29

I can barely breathe. Do I want to hear this? Edward closes his eyes and

swallows. When he opens them again they are bright but diffident, full of disquieting memories.

"It was a hot summer day. I was working hard." He snorts and shakes his head, suddenly amused. "It was back-breaking work shifting that rubble. I was on my own, and Iri – Mrs Lincoln appeared out of nowhere and brought me some lemonade. We exchanged small talk, and I made some smartass remark… and she slapped me. She slapped me so hard." Unconsciously his hand moves to his face and he caresses his cheek, his eyes clouding at the memory. *Holy shit!*

"But then she kissed me. And when she finished she slapped me again." He blinks, seemingly still confounded, even after all this time.

"I'd never been kissed before, or slapped like that."

Oh. She pounced. On a kid.

"Do you want to hear this?" Edwards asks.

Yes… No…

"Only if you want to tell me." My voice is small, as I lie facing him, reeling.

"I'm trying to give you some context."

I nod in what I hope is an encouraging manner. But I suspect I may look like a statue, frozen and wide-eyed with shock, my head remaining immobile.

He frowns, his eyes searching mine, trying to gauge my reaction. Then he turns onto his back and stares up at the ceiling.

"Well, naturally I was confused, and angry, and horny as hell. I mean a hot older woman comes on to you like that – " He shakes his head as if he still can't believe it. *Hot?* I feel queasy.

"She went back into the house, leaving me in the back yard. She acted as if nothing had happened. I was at a total loss. So I went back to work, loading the rubble into the dumpster. When I left that evening she asked me to come back the next day. She didn't

mention what had happened. So the next day I went back. I couldn't wait," he whispers as if it's a dark confession… and frankly it is.

"She didn't touch me, when she kissed me," he murmurs. He turns his head and gazes at me. "You have to understand – my life was hell on earth. I was a walking hard-on, fifteen years old, tall for my age, hormones raging. The girls at school – " He stops, but I've got the picture: a scared, lonely, but attractive adolescent. My heart twists.

"I was angry, so fucking angry at everyone; at myself, my folks. I had no friends. My therapist at the time was a total asshole, my folks – they kept me on a tight leash, they didn't understand." He stares back up at the ceiling and runs a hand through his hair. I itch to run my fingers through his hair too. But I stay still.

"I just couldn't bear anyone to touch me. I couldn't. Couldn't bear anyone near me. I used to fight… fuck did I fight. I'd get into some god-awful brawls. I was expelled from a couple of schools. But it was a way to let off steam. To tolerate some kind of physical contact." He stops again. "Well, you get the idea. And when she kissed me, she only grabbed my face. She didn't touch me." His voice is barely audible.

She must have known. Perhaps Esme had told her. *Oh, my poor Fifty*. I have to fold my hands beneath my pillow and rest my head on it in order to resist the urge to hold him. He needs this bedtime story, this confession… *I need it*. It's a precious insight into the man I love.

"Well, the next day I went back to the house, not knowing what to expect. And I'll spare you the gory details, but there was more of the same. And that's how our relationship started."

Oh fuck, this is painful to hear.

He shifts again onto his side so he's facing me.

"And you know something, Bella? My world came into focus. Sharp and clear. Everything. It was exactly what I needed. She was a breath of fresh air. Making the decisions, taking all that shit away from me, letting me breathe."

Holy shit.

"And even when it all finished, my world stayed in focus, because of her. And it stayed that way until I met you."

Oh no. What the hell am I supposed to say to that? Tentatively he reaches up and smoothes a stray lock of my hair behind my ear.

"You turned my world on its head." He closes his eyes and when he opens them again, they are raw. "My world was ordered, calm and controlled, then you came into my life with your smart mouth, your innocence, your beauty and your – quiet temerity… and everything before you was just dull, empty, mediocre… it was nothing.

Oh my.

"I fell in love," he whispers.

I stop breathing.

"So did I," I murmur, with the little breath I have left.

His eyes soften.

"I know," he mouths.

"You do?"

"Yes."

Hallelujah! I smile shyly at him. *He knows!*

"Finally," I whisper.

He nods.

"And it's put everything into perspective for me."

I blink.

"When I was younger, Irina was the centre of my world. There was nothing I wouldn't do for her. And she did a lot for me. She stopped me drinking. Made me work hard at school… you know. She gave me a coping mechanism, allowed me to experience things that I never thought I could."

Oh!

"Touch," I whisper.

He nods, wide eyed.

"After a fashion."

I frown, wondering what he means.

He blinks at my reaction and hesitates.

Tell me! I will him.

"If you grow up with a wholly negative self-image, thinking you're some kind of reject, an unlovable savage – you think you deserve to be beaten." He stops.

Oh shit… you are none of those things.

"She channeled my anger." His mouth presses together in a bleak line. "Mostly inwards, towards myself, I realize now. Dr Banner's been on and on about this for some time. It was only recently that I saw our relationship for what it was. You know – on my birthday."

I shudder as the unwelcome memory of Irina and Edward verbally disemboweling each other at Edward's birthday party surfaces in my mind.

"For her it was about sex, and control, and a lonely woman finding some kind of comfort with her toy-boy."

Oh.

"But you like control," I whisper.

"Yes. I do. I always will, Bella. It's who I am. I surrendered it for a brief while. Let someone make all my decisions for me. I couldn't do it myself – I wasn't in a fit state."

"So dropping out of Harvard?"

"That was my decision. We were no longer together. It was the best decision I ever made, until I met you."

"Me?"

"Yes."

His lips quirk up in a soft smile.

"The best decision I ever made was marrying you."

I blink at him.

"Not starting your company?"

He shakes his head.

"Not learning to fly?"

He shakes his head.

"You," he mouths. He tucks an errant hair behind my ear again. "She knew," he whispers.

I frown, not understanding.

"She knew what?"

"That I was head over heels in love with you."

Oh.

"She encouraged me to go down to Florida to see you, and I'm glad she did. She thought you'd freak out and leave. Which you did."

I flush. I'd rather not think about that.

"She thought I needed all the trappings of the lifestyle I enjoyed. "

"The Dom?" I whisper.

He nods.

"It enabled me to keep everyone at arm's length. You know why," he adds softly.

"Your birth mom?"

"I didn't want to be hurt again. And then you left me." His words are barely audible. "And I was a mess."

Oh no.

"I've avoided intimacy for so long – I don't know how to do this."

"You're doing fine," I murmur. Reaching up with my index finger I trace his lips. He purses them into a kiss.

You're talking to me.

"Do you miss it?" I whisper.

"Miss it?"

"That lifestyle."

"Yes. But only insofar as I miss the control it brings. And frankly, your stupid stunt – " He stops. "That saved my sister. That's how I know."

"Know?"

"That you love me."

I frown.

"What?"

"Because you risked so much… for me, for my family. And you're still here."

My frown deepens. He reaches over and traces his finger over the middle of my eyebrows.

"You have a v here when you frown," he whispers. "It's very soft to kiss."

"Why are you surprised I'm still here? I told you I wasn't going to leave you."

"Because of the way that I behaved when you told me you were pregnant."

I blink at him and his finger runs down my cheek.

"You were right," he murmurs. "I am an adolescent."

Oh shit… I said that. My subconscious glares at me – his doctor said that!

"Edward, I said some awful things." He puts his index finger over my lips.

"Hush. This is my bedtime story," he breathes.

He shifts on to his back again to stare up at the ceiling.

"When you told me you were pregnant – " He stops. "I'd thought it would be just you and me for a while. I had thought about children, but in the abstract. I had this vague idea we'd have a child, sometime in the future."

Just one? No… Not an only child. Not like me. Perhaps now's not the best time to bring that up.

"You are still so young, and I know you're quietly ambitious."

Ambitious? Me? Am I?

"Well, you pulled the rug from under me. Christ, was that unexpected. Never in a million years, when I asked you what was wrong, did I expect you to be pregnant." He sighs. "I was so mad. Mad at you. Mad at myself. Mad at everyone. And it took me back, that feeling of nothing being in my control. I had to get out. I went to see Banner, but he was at some school parents' evening." Edward pauses and arches an eyebrow.

"Ironic," I whisper. Edward smirks in agreement.

"So I walked and walked and walked, and I just… found myself at the salon. Irina was leaving. She was surprised to see me. And, truth be told, I was surprised to find myself there. She could tell I was mad. Asked me if I wanted a drink."

Oh shit. We've cut to the chase. My heart doubles in speed. Do I really want to know this? My subconscious glares at me, a plucked eyebrow raised in warning.

"We went to a quiet bar I know, and had a bottle of wine. She apologized for the way she behaved the last time she saw us. She's hurt that my Mom will have nothing to do with her any more – it's narrowed her social circle – but she understands. We talked about the business, which is doing fine, in spite of the recession… I mentioned that you wanted kids."

I frown. *What?*

"I thought you let her know I was pregnant."

He blinks at me.

"No, I didn't."

"Why didn't you tell me that?"

He shrugs.

"I never got the chance."

"Yes you did."

"I couldn't find you the next morning, Bella. And when I did, you were so mad at me…"

I flush.

"I was."

"Anyway, at some point in the evening – about halfway through the second bottle – she leaned over to touch me. And I froze," he whispers, throwing his arm over his eyes.

My scalp tingles. *What's this?*

"She saw that I recoiled from her. It shocked both of us." His voice is low, too low. Why won't he look at me? I tug at his arm and he lowers it, turning to gaze into my eyes.

Shit. His face is pale, his eyes wide.

"What?" I breathe.

He frowns, and swallows.

Oh… what isn't he telling me? Do I want to know?

"She made a pass at me." He's shocked, I can tell.

All the breath is sucked from my body. I feel winded, and I think my heart has stopped.

That fucking bitch troll!

"It was a moment, suspended in time. She didn't say anything, as such, but she saw my expression, and she realized how far she'd crossed the line. I said… no. I haven't thought of her like that for years, and besides," he swallows. "I love you. I told her, I love my wife."

I gaze at him. I don't know what to say.

"She backed right off. Apologized again, made it seem like a joke. I mean, she said she's happy with Seth, and with the business, and she doesn't bear either of us any ill will. She said she missed my friendship, but she could see that my life was with you now. And how awkward that was, given what happened last time we were all in the same room. I couldn't have agreed with her more. We said our goodbyes – our final goodbyes, and she went on her way."

I swallow, fear gripping my heart.

"Did you kiss?"

"No. We shook hands. It was very amicable."

Oh. Good.

"I was miserable. I wanted to come home to you. But… I knew I'd behaved badly. I stayed and finished the bottle, then started on the bourbon. While I was drinking, I remember you saying to me, 'If that was my son…' And I got to thinking about Junior, and thinking about how Irina and I started. And it made me feel – uncomfortable."

A memory blossoms in my mind – a whispered conversation. Edward's voice:

"But seeing her finally put it all in perspective for me. You know – with the child. For the first time, I felt repulsed."

He'd been speaking to Esme. Repulsed, eh?

"That's it?"

"Pretty much."

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"I'm sorry," I mutter.

He frowns.

"What for?"

"Being so angry the next day."

He snorts.

"Baby, I understand angry." He pauses, then sighs. "You see, Bella, I want you to myself. I don't want to share. What we have, I've never had before. I want to be the centre of your universe – you know. Your sun to rise and set with me."

Oh, Edward.

"It does. That's not going to change."

He gives me an indulgent, sad, resigned smile.

"Bella," he whispers. "That's just not true."

Tears prick my eyes.

"How can it be?" he murmurs.

Oh no.

"Shit – don't cry, Bella. Shit. Please, don't cry." He caresses my face.

"I'm sorry." My lower lip trembles and his thumb brushes it, soothing me.

"No, Bella, no. Don't be sorry. You'll have someone else to love as well. And you're right. That's how it should be."

"Blip will love you too. You'll be the centre of Blip's – Junior's world," I whisper. "Children love their parents unconditionally, Edward. That's how they come into the world. Programmed to love. Think about it."

His eyes widen as he realizes to whom I'm referring. He withdraws his hand, fisting it at against his chin.

"No," he whispers, and freezes.

"Yes. You did." My tears flow freely now. "Of course you did. It wasn't an option. That's why you're so hurt…"

He stares at me, pale, green eyes wide and raw. He looks so vulnerable.

"That's why you're able to love me," I breathe. "Forgive her. She had her own world of pain to deal with. She was a shit mother, and you loved her."

He gazes at me, saying nothing, green eyes wide and haunted – by memories I can't begin to fathom.

Oh Edward, please don't stop talking.

"I used to brush her hair," he whispers.

Oh my…

"She was pretty."

"One look at you and no one would doubt that," I murmur.

"She was a shit mother."

I nod and he closes his eyes.

"I am so scared I'll be a shit father."

I reach up and caress his face. Oh my Fifty, Fifty, Fifty.

"Edward, do you think for one minute I'd let you be a shit father?"

He blinks, then smiles, as relief slowly lights up his face.

"No, I don't think you would," he breathes. He caresses my face with the back of his knuckles, gazing at me in wonder. "God you're strong, Mrs Cullen. I love you so much." Leaning forward he kisses my forehead. "Now, that's the end of your bedtime story. How's your head?"

"My head?"

Frankly it's about to explode with all you've told me!

"Does it hurt?"

"No."

"Good. I think you should sleep now."

I blink at him.

"I have one question."

"Oh? What?" He eyes me warily.

"Why have you suddenly become all… forthcoming, for want of a better word?"

He frowns.

"You're telling me all this, when getting information out of you is normally a pretty harrowing and trying experience."

"It is?

"You know it is."

"Why am I being forthcoming? I can't say. Seeing you practically dead on cold concrete, maybe. The fact I'm going to be a father. I don't know. You said you wanted to know,

and I don't want Irina to come between us. She can't. She's the past – and I've said that to you so many times."

"If she hadn't made a pass at you… would you still be friends?"

"That's more than one question." He arches a brow at me.

"Sorry. You don't have to tell me." I flush. "You've already volunteered more than I ever thought you would."

His gaze softens.

"Probably. But her making that pass was a step too far for me. Please, believe me. I'm not going to see her again. You said she's a hard limit for you. That's a term I understand," he says with quiet sincerity.

Okay. I'm going to let this go now. My subconscious sags into her armchair – *Finally!*

"Goodnight, Edward. Thank you for the enlightening bedtime story." I lean over to kiss him, and our lips touch briefly, but he pulls back when I try to deepen the kiss.

"Don't," he whispers. "I am desperate to make love to you."

"Then do."

"No, you need to rest, and it's late. Go to sleep." He leans over and switches off the bedside light, plunging us into darkness.

"I love you, Edward," I murmur as I cuddle into his side.

"I know," he whispers, and I sense his shy smile.

~o0o~

I wake with a start. Light is flooding the room, and Edward is not in bed. I glance at the clock and see it's 7:53. I take a deep breath, and wince as my ribs smart – though not as badly as yesterday. I think I could go to work. *Work – Yes.* I want to go to work. It's Monday, and I spent all of yesterday lounging about in bed. Edward only let me go out briefly, to see Charlie. Honestly, he's still such a control freak. I smile fondly. *My control freak.* He's been attentive and loving and chatty and… hands-off since I arrived home. I scowl. I am going to have to do something about this. My head doesn't hurt, the pain around my ribs has eased – though admittedly laughing has to be undertaken with caution – but frankly, I'm frustrated. I think this is the longest I've gone without sex since… well, since the first time.

I think we've both recovered our equilibrium. Edward is much more relaxed; his long bedtime story seems to have laid some ghosts to rest, for him *and* for me. We'll see.

I shower quickly, and once I'm dry browse carefully through my clothes. I want something… sexy. Something that might galvanize Edward into action. Who would have thought such an insatiable man could actually exercise so much self-control? I don't really want to dwell on how Edward learned such discipline over his body… We haven't spoken of the bitch troll once since his confessional. I hope we never do. To me she's dead and buried.

I choose an almost indecently short black skirt, and a white silk blouse with a frill. I slide on thigh-highs with lacy tops, and my black Louboutin pumps. A little mascara and lip-gloss for a natural look, and after a ferocious brushing I leave my hair loose… Yes. This should do it.

Edward is eating at the breakfast bar. His forkful of omelet stops in mid air when he sees me. He frowns.

"Good morning, Mrs Cullen. Going anywhere?"

"Work," I smile sweetly.

"I don't think so," Edward snorts with amused derision. "Dr Singh said a week off."

"Edward, I am not spending the day lounging in bed. On my own. So I may as well go to work. Good morning, Gail."

"Mrs Cullen." Mrs Cope tries to hide a smile. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"Please."

"Granola?"

"I'd prefer scrambled eggs with whole-wheat toast."

Mrs Cope beams and Edward registers his surprise.

"Very good, Mrs Cullen." Mrs Cope says.

"Bella, you are not going to work."

"But – "

"No. It's simple. Don't argue." Edward is adamant. I glare at him, and only then do I notice that Edward is in the same PJ bottoms and t-shirt he was wearing last night.

"Are you going to work?" I ask.

"No."

Am I going crazy?

"It is Monday, right?"

He smiles.

"Last time I looked."

I narrow my eyes.

"Are you playing hooky?"

"I'm not leaving you here on your own to get into trouble. And Dr Singh said it would be a week before you could go back to work. Remember?"

Oh.

I slide on to a bar stool beside him, and Mrs Cope places a cup of tea in front of me.

"You look good," Edward says.

I cross my legs.

"Very good. Especially here." He traces a finger over the bare flesh that shows above my thigh-highs. My pulse quickens as his finger runs across my skin. "This skirt is very short," he murmurs, vague disapproval in his voice, as his eyes follow his finger.

"Is it? I hadn't noticed."

Edward gazes at me, mouth twisted in an amused yet exasperated smirk.

"Really, Mrs Cullen?"

I flush.

"I'm not sure this look is suitable for the workplace," he murmurs.

"Well, since I'm not going to work, that's a moot point."

"Moot?"

"Moot," I mouth.

Edward smirks again and resumes eating his omelet.

"I have a better idea," he murmurs.

"You do?"

He glances at me through long dark lashes, green eyes darkening. I inhale sharply. *Oh my. About time.*

"We can go see how Emmett's getting on with the house."

What? Oh! Tease! I vaguely remember we were supposed to do that before Charlie was injured.

"I'd love to."

"Good," he grins.

"Don't you have to work?"
"No. Kate's back from Taiwan. That all went well. Today, everything's fine."

"I thought *you* were going to Taiwan."

He snorts again.

"Bella, you were in the hospital."

"Oh."

"Yeah – oh. So today, I'm spending some quality time with my wife." He smacks his lips together as he takes a sip of coffee.

"Quality time?" I can't disguise the hope in my voice.

Mrs Cope places my scrambled eggs in front of me, again failing to hide her smile.

Edward smirks.

"Quality time." He nods.

I am too hungry to flirt any more with my husband.

"It's good to see you eat," he murmurs. Rising he kisses my hair. "I'm going to shower."

"Um… can I come and scrub your back?" I mumble through a mouth full of toast and scrambled egg.

"No. Eat."

Leaving the breakfast bar he tugs his t-shirt over his head, treating me to the sight of his finely sculptured shoulders and his naked back as he heads out of the great room. I stop mid-chew. He's doing this on purpose. *Why?*

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Charlie is in good spirits. Billy is visiting too, and they've both settled down in front of the large new flat-screen TV in Charlie's room. I suspect Edward had something to do with that. We leave them waiting for re-runs of the Mariners games from the previous weekend.

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Edward is relaxed on the drive North. He's been this way ever since 'the talk'. It's like a weight has been lifted; Mrs Robinson's shadow no longer looms so large over us, maybe because I've decided to let it go – or because he has, I don't know. But I feel closer to him now than I ever have before. Perhaps because he's confided in me. I hope he continues to do so. And he's more accepting of the baby, too. He hasn't gone out and bought a crib yet, but I have high hopes.

I gaze at him as he drives, drinking him in. He looks casual, cool… sexy. Tousled hair, Ray-Bans, pin stripe jacket, white linen shirt and jeans.

He glances across at me, reaches over and clasps my leg above the knee, his fingers stroking gently.

"I'm glad you didn't change," he says.

I did slip on a denim jacket and change to flats, but I'm still wearing the short skirt. His hand lingers above my knee. I put my hand on his.

"Are you going to continue to tease me?"

"Maybe," Edward smiles.

"Why?"

"Because I can." He grins, boyish as ever.

"Two can play at that game," I whisper.

His fingers move tantalizingly up my thigh.

"Bring it on, Mrs Cullen," he challenges, his grin broadening.

I pick up his hand and put it back on his knee.

"Well, you can keep your hands to yourself."

He smirks.

"As you wish, Mrs Cullen."

Dammit. This game is going to backfire on me.

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Edward turns into the driveway of our new house. He stops at the keypad and punches in a number, and the ornate white metal gates swing open. We roar up the tree-lined lane, under leaves that are a mixture of green and yellow and burnished copper. The tall grass in the meadow is turning from green to gold, but there are still a few yellow wildflowers dotted amongst the grass. It's a beautiful warm day. The sun is shining, but the smell of fall is in the air; the smell of fall, and the salty scent of the Sound. This is such a tranquil place, tranquil and beautiful… and to think we're going to make our home here.

The lane curves round, and our house comes into view. Several large trucks, sides emblazoned with 'Cullen Construction', are parked out front. The house is decked in scaffolding and several workmen in hard hats are busy on the roof.

Edward pulls up outside the portico and switches off the engine. I can sense his excitement.

"Let's go find Emmett."

"Is he here?"

"I hope so. I'm paying him enough."

I snort, and Edward grins as we clamber out of the car.

"Yo, Bro!" Emmett shouts from somewhere. We both glance around. "Up here!"

He's up on the roof, waving down at us, beaming from ear to ear. "About time we saw you here. Stay where you are. I'll be right down."

I glance at Edward, who shrugs. A few minutes later Emmett appears at the front door.

"Hey, Bro." He shakes Edward's hand. "And how are you, little lady?" He picks me up and swings me round.

"Better, thanks," I giggle breathlessly, my ribs protesting. Edward frowns at him, but Emmett is oblivious.

"Let's head over to the site office. You'll need one of these." He taps his hard hat.

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The house is a shell. The floors are covered in a hard fibrous material that looks like burlap; some of the original walls have disappeared, and new ones have appeared. Emmett leads us through, explaining what's happening, while men – and a few women – work everywhere around us. I'm relieved to see the stone staircase with its intricate iron balustrade is still in place, and draped completely in white dustsheets.

In the main living area the back wall has been removed to make way for Tanya's glass wall, and work is beginning on the terrace. In spite of the mess, the view is still stunning. The new work is sympathetic and in keeping with the old-world charm of the house… Tanya's done well. Emmett patiently explains the processes and gives us a rough timeframe for each of them. He's hoping we can be in by Christmas, although Edward thinks this is optimistic.

Holy crow – Christmas overlooking the Sound… I can't wait. A bubble of excitement blooms inside me… I have visions of us trimming an enormous tree, while copper-haired little boy looks on in wonder…

Emmett finishes our tour in the kitchen.

"I'll leave you two to roam. Be careful. This is a building site."

"Sure. Thanks, Em," Edward murmurs, taking my hand. "Happy?" he asks, once Emmett has left us alone. I am gazing at this empty shell of a room and wondering where I will hang the pepper pictures that we bought in France.

"Very. I love it. You?"

"Ditto." He grins.

"Good. I was thinking of the pepper pictures in here."

Edward nods his approval.

"I want to put Jake's portraits of you up in this house. You need to decide where they should go."

I flush.

"Somewhere I won't see them often."

"Don't be like that," he scolds, reaching up and brushing his thumb across my bottom lip. "They're my favorite pictures. I love the one in my office."

"I have no idea why," I murmur, and kiss the pad of his thumb.

"Worse things to do than look at your beautiful smiling face all day. Hungry?" he asks.

"Hungry for what?" I whisper.

He smirks, his eyes darkening. Hope and desire unfurl in my veins.

"Food, Mrs Cullen," he murmurs, and he plants a swift kiss on my lips. I give him my faux pout and sigh.

"Yes. These days I'm always hungry."

"I brought all three of us a picnic."

"Three of us? Is someone joining us?"

Edward cocks his head at me.

"In about seven or eight months' time."

Oh… Blip. I grin goofily at him.

"I thought you might like to eat al fresco."

"In the meadow?" I ask.

He nods.

"Sure," I grin.

"This will be a great place to raise a family," he murmurs, gazing down at me.

Family! More than one? Dare I mention this now?

Reaching down he spreads his fingers over my belly. Holy shit. I hold my breath, and place my hand over his.

"It's hard to believe," he whispers, and for the first time I hear wonder in his voice.

"I know. Oh – here, I have evidence. A picture."

"You do? Baby's first smile?"

From my wallet I pull out the ultrasound of Blip.

"See?"

Edward examines it closely, staring for several seconds.

"Oh… Blip. Yeah, I see." He sounds distracted… awed.

"Your child," I whisper.

"Our child," he counters.

"First of many."

"Many?" Edward's eyes widen with alarm.

"At least two."

"Two?" He tests the word. "Can we just take this steady? You know, one child at a time?"

I grin.

"Sure."

We head back outside into the warm fall afternoon.

"When are you going to tell your folks?" Edward asks.

"Soon," I murmur. "I thought about telling my dad this morning, but Billy was there." I shrug.

Edward nods in understanding, and opens the hood of the R8. Inside is a wicker picnic basket and the tartan blanket we bought in London.

"Come," he says, taking the basket and blanket in one hand, and holding the other out to me. Together we walk into the meadow.

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"Sure, Kate, go for it." Edward hangs up. That's the third call he's taken during our picnic. He's kicked off his shoes and socks, and is sitting watching me, arms on his raised knees. His jacket lies discarded on top of mine, as we're so warm in the sun. I lie beside him, stretched out on the tartan picnic blanket, both of us surrounded by tall golden and green grass, hidden from view in our own bucolic haven. He feeds me another strawberry, and I chew and suck it gratefully, gazing at his darkening eyes.

"Tasty?" he whispers.

"Very."

"Had enough?"

"Of strawberries, yes."

His eyes glitter dangerously, and he grins down at me.

"Mrs Cope packs a mighty fine picnic," he says.

"That she does," I whisper.

Shifting suddenly he lies down so his head is resting on my belly. He closes his eyes, and seems momentarily content. I reach down and my fingers tangle in his hair.

He sighs heavily, then scowls, and checks the number on the screen of his silently buzzing BlackBerry. He rolls his eyes, and takes the call.

"Jenks," he snaps. He tenses, listens for a minute or two, then suddenly sits bolt upright.

"24/7… Thanks," he says through gritted teeth, and hangs up. The change in his mood is instant. Gone is my teasing flirtatious husband, to be replaced by a cold, calculating, angry master of the universe. He narrows his eyes for a moment, then gives me a cool, chilling smile. A shiver runs down my back. He picks up his BlackBerry and presses a speed dial.

"Kate, how much stock do we own in Lincoln Timber?" He kneels up.

My scalp prickles. Oh no, what's this?

Edward continues, "So I thought… Consolidate the shares into CEH, then fire the board… except the CEO. …I don't give a fuck… I hear you, just do it… thank you." He hangs up, and gazes at me impassively for a moment.

Holy shit! Edward is mad.

"What's happened?"

"Linc," he murmurs.

"Linc? Irina's ex?"

"The same. He's the one who posted Smith's bail."

What? Why? I gape at Edward in shock. His mouth is pressed in a hard line.

"Well – he'll look an idiot," I murmur, dismayed. "I mean, Smith committed another crime while out on bail."

Edwards eyes narrow and he smirks.

"Fair point, well made, Mrs Cullen."

"What did you just do?" I kneel up, facing him.

"I fucked him over."

Oh!

"Um… that seems a little impulsive," I murmur.

"I'm an in-the-moment kind of guy," he counters.

"I'm aware of that."

His eyes narrow and his lips thin.

"I've had this plan in my back pocket for a while," he says dryly.

I frown.

"Oh?"

He pauses, seeming to weigh up something in his mind, then takes a deep breath.

"Several years ago – I was twenty-one – Linc beat his wife to a pulp. He broke her jaw, her left arm and four of her ribs, because she was fucking me." His eyes harden. "And now I learn he posted bail for a man who tried to kill me, kidnapped my sister and fractured my wife's skull. I think it's payback time."

I blanch. *Holy shit.*

"Fair point, well made, Mr Cullen," I whisper.

"Bella, this is what I do. I'm not usually motivated by revenge, but I cannot let him get away with this. What he did to Irina – well, she should have pressed charges, but she didn't – that's her deal. But he's seriously crossed the line with Smith. Linc's made this personal by going after my family. I'm going to crush him. Break up his company right under his nose and sell the pieces to the highest bidder."

Oh…

"Besides," Edward smirks. "We'll make good money out of the deal."

I stare into blazing green eyes… that soften suddenly.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he whispers.

"You didn't," I lie.

He arches a brow, amused.

"You just took me by surprise," I whisper, then swallow. Edward is really quite scary sometimes.

Leaning down he brushes my lips with his.

"I will do anything to keep you safe. Keep my family safe. Keep this little one safe," he murmurs, and reaching down splays his hand out over my belly in a gentle caress.

Oh… I stop breathing. Will I ever get used to this? Him touching me there? Touching Blip? Edward gazes down at me, his eyes widening, darkening. His lips part as he inhales and in a deliberate move the tips of his fingers brush against my sex. *Holy shit.* Desire detonates like an incendiary device igniting my bloodstream. I grasp his head, my fingers weaving into his hair, and tug hard so my lips find his. He gasps, surprised by my assault,

giving my tongue free and safe passage into his mouth. He groans and kisses me back, his lips and tongue hungry for mine, and for a moment we consume each other, lost in tongues and lips and breaths and sweet, sweet sensation as we rediscover each other.

Oh, I want this man. It's been too long. I want him here, now, in the open air, in our meadow.

"Bella," he breathes, entranced, and his hand skims over my backside to the hem of my skirt. I scramble to unbutton his shirt, all fingers and thumbs.

"Whoa, Bella – stop." He pulls back, his jaw clenched, and grabs my hands.

"No." My teeth clamp gently around his lower lip and I tug. "No," I murmur again, gazing at him. I release him. "I want you."

He inhales sharply. He's torn, his indecision writ large in luminous green eyes.

"Please," I whisper. "I need you." Every pore of my being is begging. *This is what we do.*

He groans in defeat as his mouth finds mine, molding my lips to his. One hand cradles my head, while the other skims down my body to my waist, and he eases me on to my back and stretches out beside me, never breaking contact with my mouth.

He pulls back, hovering over me, gazing down at me.

"You are so beautiful, Mrs Cullen."

I reach up to caress his lovely face.

"So are you, Mr Cullen. Inside and out."

He frowns, and my fingers trace the furrow in his brow.

"Don't frown. You are to me, even when you're angry," I whisper.

He groans once more, and his mouth captures mine, pushing me into the soft grass beneath the blanket.

"I've missed you," he whispers, and his teeth graze my jaw. My heart soars.

"I've missed you too. Oh, Edward." I fist one hand in his hair and clutch his shoulder with the other.

His lips move to my throat, leaving tender kisses in their wake, and his fingers follow, deftly undoing each button of my blouse. Tugging my blouse apart he kisses the soft swell of my breasts. He murmurs appreciatively, low in his throat, and the sound echoes through my body to my deep dark places.

"You're body's changing," he whispers. His thumb teases my nipple until its erect and straining against my bra. "I like," he adds. I watch his tongue taste and trace the line between my bra and my breast… Tantalizing and teasing me… Taking my bra cup delicately between his teeth he pulls it down, freeing my breast and nuzzling my nipple with his nose in the process. It puckers at his touch and from the chill of the gentle fall breeze. His lips close around me and he sucks long and hard.

"Ah!" I groan, inhaling sharply, then wincing as pain radiates outwards from my bruised ribs.

"Bella!" Edward gasps, and gazes down at me, concern etched on his face. "This is what I'm talking about," he admonishes. "Your lack of self-preservation. I don't want to hurt you."

"No… don't stop," I whimper. He stares down at me, warring with himself. "Please," I whisper.

"Here." Abruptly he moves, and I'm sitting astride him, my short skirt now bunched up around my hips. His hands glide over the top of my thigh-highs.

"There. That's better, and I can enjoy the view." He reaches up and hooks his long index finger into my other bra cup, freeing that breast too. Reaching up he grasps both of my breasts, and I throw my head back, pushing them into his welcome expert hands. He teases me, tugging and rolling my nipples as I cry out, then sits up so we're nose to nose, his greedy green eyes on mine. He kisses me, his fingers still teasing me. I scramble for his shirt, undoing the first two buttons, and it's like sensory overload – I want to be kissing him everywhere, undressing him, making love with him all at once.

"Hey – " he grasps my head and sits back, green eyes dark and full of sensual promise. "There's no rush. Take it slow. I want to savor you."

"Edward, it's been so long." I'm panting.

"Slow," he whispers, a command, and he kisses the right corner of my mouth. "Slow." He kisses the left corner. "Slow, baby." He tugs my bottom lip with his teeth. "Slow. Let's take this slow." He unfurls his fingers in my hair, keeping me in place as his tongue invades my mouth, seeking, tasting, calming… inflaming. Oh, my man can kiss.

Oh, Edward. I caress his face, my fingers moving tentatively down to his chin to his throat, and I start again on the buttons of his shirt, taking my time, as he continues to kiss me. Slowly I pull his shirt apart, my fingers trailing over his clavicles, feeling their way across his warm, silky skin. I push him gently back until he's lying beneath me. Sitting up I gaze down at him, aware that I'm squirming against his growing erection. *Hmmm.* I trace my fingers across his lips, to his jaw then down his neck, over his Adam's apple to that little dip at the base of his throat. *My beautiful man.* I lean down, and my kisses follow the tips of my fingers. My teeth graze his jaw and kiss his throat. He closes his eyes.

"Ah," he breathes, and tilts his head back, giving me easier access to the base of his throat, his mouth slack and open in silent veneration. Edward lost and aroused is just so exhilarating… so arousing for me.

My tongue trails down his sternum, twirling through his chest hair. *Hmmm.* He tastes so good. He smells so good. Intoxicating. I kiss first one, then two of his small round scars, and he grasps my hips, my fingers still on his chest as I gaze down at him. His breathing is harsh.

"You want this? Here?" he breathes, his eyes hooded with a heady combination of love and lust.

"Hmmm." I murmur my assent, and my lips and tongue graze across his chest to his nipple. I pull and roll it gently with my teeth.

"Oh Bella," he breathes, and circling my waist he lifts me, tugging at his button fly so he springs free. He sits me down again, and he's hot and hard, and I push against him, delighting in the feel of him beneath me. He runs his hands up my thighs, pausing where my thigh-highs stop and my flesh begins, his thumbs running small teasing circles at the top of my thighs so that the tips of his thumbs touch me… touch me where I want to be touched. I gasp.

"I hope you're not attached to your underwear," he murmurs, his eyes wild and bright. His fingers trace the elastic along my belly then slide inside, teasing me, before grabbing my panties tightly and pushing his thumbs through the delicate material. My panties disintegrate. His hands splay out on my thighs and his thumbs brush against my sex once more. He flexes his hips so his erection rubs against me.

"I can feel how wet you are… no hands," he whispers, his voice tinged with carnal appreciation, and he suddenly sits up, his arm around my waist again, so we're nose to nose. He rubs his nose against mine.

"We're going to take this slow, Mrs Cullen," he breathes, "I want to feel all of you." He lifts me, and with exquisite, frustrating, slow ease, lowers me onto him. I feel each blessed inch of him fill me…

"Ah – " I groan incoherently as I reach out to clasp his arms. I try to lift myself off him for some welcome friction, but he holds me in place.

"All of me," he whispers, and tilts his pelvis, pushing himself into me all the way. I tilt my head back and let out a strangulated cry of pure pleasure.

"Let me hear you," he murmurs. "No – don't move, just feel."

I open my eyes, my mouth frozen in a silent *Ah!* and he's gazing at me… hooded licentious green eyes into dazed brown. He shifts, rolling his hips, but holds me in place.

I groan. His lips are at my throat, kissing me.

"This is my favorite place. Buried in you," he murmurs against my skin.

"Please, move," I plead.

"Slow, Mrs Cullen." He flexes his hips again and pleasure radiates through me. I cup his face and kiss him, consuming him.

"Love me," I breathe. "Please, Edward."

His teeth skim my jaw up to my ear.

"Go," he whispers and he lifts me up and down. My inner goddess is unleashed and I push him down on the ground and start to move, savoring the feeling of him inside me…. riding him… riding him hard. With his hands around my waist he matches my rhythm. I have missed this… the heady feeling of him beneath me, inside me… the sun on my back, the sweet smell of fall in the air, the gentle autumnal breeze – it's a heady fusion of senses: touch, taste, smell… and the sight of my beloved husband beneath me.

"Oh Bella," he groans. Eyes closed, head back, mouth open… ah… I love this. And inside, I'm building… building… climbing… higher. Edward's hands move to my thighs, and delicately his thumbs press at their apex, and I explode around him… over and over and over and over… and I collapse, sprawled on his chest, as he cries out in turn, letting go, calling out my name, with love and joy.

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He cuddles me against his chest, cradling my head. *Hmmm.* Closing my eyes I savor the feel of his arms around me. My hand is on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart as it slows and calms. I kiss and nuzzle him, and marvel briefly that not long ago he would not have let me do this.

“Better?” he whispers. I raise my head. He’s grinning broadly at me.

“Much. You?” My answering grin reflects his.

“I’ve missed you, Mrs Cullen,” he breathes, serious for a moment.

“Me too.”

“No more heroics, eh?”

“No,” I promise.

“You should always talk to me,” he whispers.

“Back at you, Cullen.”

He smirks.

“Fair point, well made. I’ll try.” He kisses my hair.

“I think we’re going to be happy here,” I whisper, closing my eyes again.

“Yep. You, me and … Blip. How do you feel, incidentally?”

“Fine. Relaxed. Happy.”

“Good.”

“You?”

“Yeah, all those things,” he murmurs.

I look up at him, trying to gauge his expression.

“What?” he asks.

“You know, you’re very bossy when we have sex.”

“Are you complaining?”

“No. I’m just wondering… if you miss it?”

He stills, gazing at me.

"Sometimes," he whispers.

Oh.

"Well, we'll have to see what we can do about that," I murmur, and kiss him lightly on his lips, curling around him like a vine. Images of us together, in the playroom, at the Heathman, in the elevator, in the R8… I love his kinky fuckery – our kinky fuckery. Yes. I can do that stuff. I can do that for him, with him. I can do that for me. My skin tingles as I remember the riding crop.

"I like to play too," I murmur, and glancing up I'm treated to his shy smile.

"Well, maybe when we get home," he whispers, leaving that promise hanging between us.

I nuzzle him once more. I love him so.

~o0o~

It's been two days since our picnic. Two days since the promise of 'well, maybe when we get home' was made. Edward is still treating me like I'm made of glass. I put the stack of query letters I've been reading aside on my desk and sigh. Edward and I haven't been back in the playroom since I safeworded. And he's said he misses it sometimes. Frankly, so do I. My thoughts are interrupted by soft, lyrical music that fills the apartment. Edward is playing the piano; not one of his usual laments… a sweet melody, a hopeful melody – one that I recognize, but have never heard him play. Whoa!

I tiptoe to the archway of the great room and watch Edward at the piano. It's dusk. The sky is an opulent pink, and the light is reflected off his burnished copper hair. He looks his beautiful breathtaking self, concentrating as he plays, unaware of my presence. He's been so forthcoming over the last few days, so attentive – offering small insights into his day, his thoughts, his plans. It's like he's breached a dam, and started talking.

I know he'll come to check on me in a few minutes… and it gives me an idea. Excited I steal away, hoping that he still hasn't noticed me, and race to our room, quickly stripping off my clothes on the way, until I'm wearing nothing but the pale blue lace panties that Taylor bought. I find a pale blue camisole and slip into it quickly. It will hide my bruise. Diving into the closet I pull out from the drawer Edward's faded jeans – his playroom jeans, my favorite jeans. I fold them neatly, kneel by the bedroom door and wait. The door is ajar, and I can hear the strains of another piece, one I don't know. But it's another hopeful tune… it's lovely.

The music stops abruptly. I begin to count… and thirty-seven seconds later the door opens. I look down at his bare feet as they pause on the threshold. *Hmm.* He says

nothing… for ages he says nothing. *Oh shit.* I resist the urge to look up at him, and keep my eyes downcast.

Finally he reaches down and picks up his jeans. He says nothing, but heads into the walk-in closet, while I remain stock still. Oh my… this is it. My heart starts thundering and I relish the rush of adrenaline that spikes through my body. I squirm as my excitement builds. What will he do to me? A few moments later he's back, wearing the jeans.

"So you want to play?" he murmurs.

"Yes."

He says nothing, and I risk a quick glance… up his jeans, his denim clad thighs, the soft bulge at his fly, the open button at the waist, his happy trail, his navel, his chiseled abdomen, his chest hair… his green eyes blazing, and his head cocked to one side. He's arching an eyebrow. *Oh shit.*

"Yes what?" he whispers.

Oh.

"Yes, Sir."

His eyes darken and my breath hitches.

"Good girl," he murmurs, and he caresses my head. "I think we'd better get you upstairs, now," he adds. My insides liquefy and my belly clenches in that delicious way.

Oh I love this man: my husband, my lover, father of my child, my sometimes Dominant… my Fifty Shades.

The End

Outtakes

Outtake 1: First Sight

"Tomorrow," I say dismissively as Laurent exits my office.

"Golf? Definitely, Cullen."

My trainer's parting words rub salt into my wounds. In spite of my heroic attempts he's kicked my butt around the gym this morning – the only one who can beat me… and now he wants his pound of flesh on the golf course. I hate golf. But so much business is done on the golf course, and though I hate to admit it, he does improve my game.

Staring out at the Seattle skyline the all-too-familiar ennui seeps into my consciousness. I need a diversion, otherwise it's more of the same… the only thing to vaguely excite me this week has been my decision to send two freighters of food to Darfur. Which reminds me – Kate, she's supposed to come back to me with numbers and logistics – what the hell is keeping her? And right now I have to endure a dull interview with the persistent Miss Hale from WSU, for their student magazine. Why the fuck did I agree to this? I loathe interviews… inane questions from inane ill-informed vacuous idiots. The phone buzzes.

"Yes," I snap irritably.

"Miss Isabella Swan is here to see you, Mr Cullen."

"Swan? I was expecting Rosalie Hale."

"It's Miss Isabella Swan who's here, Sir."

"Show her in."

Well, well… Miss Hale unavailable. I know her father Alec, owner of Hale Media –we do business together occasionally. He seems a shrewd businessman and a rational human being. This is my favour to him. I'm vaguely curious about his daughter, to see if the apple has fallen far from the tree. A commotion at the door distracts me as a whirl of long chestnut hair, pale limbs and brown boots dives head first into my office. I have to repress

my natural urge to laugh as I hastily make my way over to the poor girl on the floor and help her to her feet.

Warm, brown, embarrassed eyes meet mine – and stop me in my tracks. They are the most extraordinary color… eyes with dark hidden depths… and my curiosity is piqued instantaneously – what secrets do they hold? She flushes, an innocent pale rose, and I wonder briefly if all her skin is like that – flawless – and what it would look like pink and warmed from the bite of a cane… Fuck. I halt my wayward thoughts, alarmed at their direction – she's way too young. She gapes at me, and I have to repress the urge to roll my eyes. Yeah, yeah, beauty is just skin-deep, baby. You really don't want to go deeper than that with me.

Showtime, Edward – but let's have some fun…

"Miss Hale? I'm Edward Cullen. Are you all right? Would you like to sit?"

There's that flush again. She's really quite attractive in a gauche way – slight, pale, with a mane of glorious hair barely contained by that hair tie. What would it look like loose around her slim, naked shoulders…? Cullen! Where exactly are you going with that thought? I extend a hand. She stutters an apology and places her small hand in mine… contact. Her skin is cool and soft, but her handshake surprisingly firm.

"Miss Hale is err… indisposed, so she sent me. I hope you don't mind, Mr Cullen." Her voice is quiet with a hesitant musicality and she blinks at me erratically, long lashes fluttering over those dark, dark eyes. Unable to keep the amusement from my voice as I recall her less than decorous entrance into my office, I ask who she is.

"Isabella Swan. I'm studying English with Rose… err Rosalie… err Miss Hale at Washington State."

Nervous, bashful, bookish type eh? She looks it. She's dressed appallingly. Hiding all her curves beneath that plain sweater. How can this young woman be a journalist? She doesn't have an assertive bone in her body. She's all charmingly flustered, meek, mild… submissive. What an intriguing thought…. Cullen! I shake my head slightly, vaguely amused at my inappropriate thoughts, traveling a well-worn but unwelcome path. I am puzzled by the effect she has on me. Muttering some platitude I ask her to sit, and notice her dark gaze appraising my office paintings. Before I can stop myself, I am explaining them.

"A local artist. Trouton," I murmur.

"They're lovely. Raising the ordinary to extraordinary," she says dreamily, lost in the paintings' exquisite fine artistry. Her profile is so delicate – an upturned nose, soft, full lips – and her words… She mirrors my sentiments exactly – the ordinary to extraordinary. And

it's a keen observation on a first glance… she's bright. I mutter my agreement as I sit down opposite her.

She proceeds to fish a crumpled sheaf of paper and a minidisk recorder out of her overlarge bag, and then she's all fingers and thumbs, dropping the damned thing twice on my Bauhaus coffee table. She's obviously never done this before. For some reason I can't fathom, I find it… amusing. Normally this kind of fumbling maladroitness would irritate the fuck out of me but I have to bite my lip not to laugh, and resist the urge not to set it up for her myself. She's becoming more and more flustered and it occurs to me that I could refine her motor skills – with the aid of a riding crop. Aptly used it can bring even the most skittish to heel. The thought makes me shift slightly in my chair. Steady boy… stop this.

She peeks up at me and bites down on her full bottom lip. Fuck! That mouth! How did I not notice that before? The bottom lip plump and full… yes, I'd like to bite it too.

"Sorry," she stutters. "I'm not used to this."

I can tell, baby – my thought is ironic – but right now I can't take my eyes off your mouth.

"Take all the time you need, Miss Swan." I need some time here to marshal my squalid, wayward, completely unprofessional thoughts. *What is it about this girl?*

"Do you mind if I record your answers?" she asks, oh-so innocently.

I want to laugh. Oh, thank fuck.

"After you've taken so much trouble to set up the recorder… you ask me now?" I can't help but tease her. She blinks at me, those dark doe-eyes lost and wary for a moment. Stop being such a shit, Cullen.

"No, I don't mind," I mutter, chastened by her look.

"Did Rose… I mean Miss Hale, explain what the interview was for?"

"Yes – your student newspaper, *WSU Eyewitness*. To appear in the graduation issue, as I shall be conferring the degrees at this year's graduation ceremony." And why the fuck I agreed to do *that* I don't know. Sam in PR would tell me it's because it's an honor, and because the research program with the environmental science department in Vancouver needs publicity to attract additional funding to match my own donation.

Miss Flushing Swan blinks at me once more, as if what I've just said is some surprise, and looks vaguely disapproving. Surely she's done some background work for this interview? She should know this… but it appears not. The thought cools my blood – it's displeasing, not what I would expect from her or anyone I've donated my time to. Cullen,

you don't know her! And I'm left with the irritating thought that I'd like to know her, and know her well… know her intimately.

"Good… well, I have some questions… Mr Cullen." She smoothes a stray lock of hair behind her ear, distracting me from my annoyance.

"I thought you might," I mutter dryly. Let's make her squirm.

She squirms obligingly, then seems to pull herself together. Leaning forward she presses the start button on the minidisk and glances down at her crumpled notes.

"You're very young to have amassed such an empire. To what do you owe your success?" I have to resist the urge to sigh heavily and scold her – she can do better than this, surely? What a dull question – very disappointing, not one iota of originality. I trot out my usual response which, if she'd done her homework, she would know.

Quite simply, I have some exceptional people working for me. People I trust – in as far as I trust anyone – and whom I pay well, but the fact is, I'm a fucking genius at what I do – it's like falling off a log. I buy ailing, mismanaged companies, and fix them – or if they're really broken, strip them like a locust and sell off the assets. It's simply a question of knowing the difference between the two – and it always comes down to the people running them. You need good people, and I can judge a person, better than most.

"Maybe you're just lucky," she says quietly.

Lucky? No luck involved here, Miss Swan. I feel a brief frisson of annoyance and my interest is piqued again. She looks unassuming and quiet… but this question… No one's ever asked me if I'm *lucky*. Hard work, and bringing people with me – keeping a close watch on them, second-guessing them if need be – and if they're not up to the task, ditching them quickly – that's what I do, and I do it well. Flaunting my erudition, I quote my favorite American industrialist:

"I think it was Harvey Firestone who said "the growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership."

"You sound like a control freak."

Again she catches me off guard, and I want to snort with laughter. She really has no idea – Control is my middle name. I gaze at her. What I'd do to control you, baby…

"Oh, I exercise control in all things, Miss Swan," I answer darkly.

Her eyes widen, her face flushes, and she bites down on that fucking lip again. It's – arousing. Why? *What is it about this girl?* I try and keep my thoughts on track – continuing my thoughts on control.

"Besides, immense power is acquired by assuring yourself, in your secret reveries, that you were born to control things." *Like I want to control you.* For fuck's sake Cullen! You've known her all of two minutes!

"Do you feel that you have immense power?"

My annoyance grows. Deep down I can pretend it's her persistent questions to which she should already know the answers. But really… it's my own, unwelcome, response to her that's annoying me.

"I employ over fifty thousand people Miss Swan. That gives me a certain… sense of responsibility. Of power, if you will. If I were to decide I was no longer interested in the telecommunications business and sell up, twenty five thousand people would struggle to make their mortgage payments after a month or so…"

Her mouth pops open at my response. Suck it up, Miss Swan… I feel my equilibrium returning.

"Don't you have a board to answer to?"

I respond quickly. Another one she should know, and I raise my eyebrow at her.

"And do you have any interests outside of your work?" she continues, hastily, gauging my reaction… she's flustered again. I want to snort with laughter.

"I have varied interests, Miss Swan." And I cannot help my smile. Oh, I would like to acquaint you with my interests, baby… somehow I don't think you'd be impressed. Images of her in varying positions in my playroom come unbidden to my mind… shackled on the cross, spread-eagled on the four-poster, splayed over the whipping bench. Fuck… Cullen, control yourself! Fuck. There's the flush again – it's like a defense mechanism.

"But if you work so hard, what do you do to chill out?"

"Chill out?" I grin at her. What an expression! Does she have any idea of the number of companies I'm running? And then it occurs to me: what *do* I do to chill out? Sailing… flying… fucking… and beating the shit out of brown-haired girls like you. I answer her smoothly, omitting my two favorite hobbies.

"You invest in manufacturing… why, specifically?"

Her question drags me back to the present.

"I like to build things. I like to know how things work, what makes things tick… how to construct and deconstruct. And I have a love of ships… what can I say? They distribute food round the planet. What's not to like?

"That sounds like your heart talking, rather than logic and facts."

Heart? Me? My heart was savaged beyond recognition a long time ago.

"Possibly… though some people I know would say I don't have a heart."

"Why would they say that?"

"Because they know me well," I smile at her wryly. No-one knows me well – except Irina of course. I wonder what she'd make of little Miss Swan here. The girl's a mass of contradictions – shy, uneasy, obviously bright… and arousing as hell. Yes, okay, I admit it – I'd like to truss her up, flay her and fuck her. But it's not going to happen.

"Would your friends say that you are easy to get to know?"

"I'm a very private person, Miss Swan, and I'll go a long way to protect my privacy. I don't often give interviews…" Doing what I do, I have no choice.

"Why did you agree to do this interview?"

"Because I'm a benefactor of the university, and I couldn't get Miss Hale off my back. She badgered and badgered my PR people… and I admire that kind of tenacity." And now I'm so glad that you've turned up, and not Alec Hale's daughter.

"You also invest in farming technologies… Why are you interested in this area?"

"We can't eat money, Miss Swan, and there are too many people on this planet who don't have enough to eat." I stare at her impassively. No way am I going into this dark area of my life.

"That sounds very philanthropic. Is that something you feel passionately about? Feeding the world's poor?"

I shrug. Better bluff your way out of this, Cullen. "It's shrewd business."

Frowning at me skeptically, a little v forms on her brow. I'd like to kiss it… after I've fucked that mouth… yes. That mouth needs training.

"Do you have a philosophy? If so, what is it?"

"I don't have a philosophy as such… maybe a guiding principle, Carnegie's: 'A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his own mind may take possession of anything else to which he is justly entitled.' I'm very singular – driven. I like control… of myself and those around me."

"So you want to possess things…"

Yes I do, baby. You, for one. The thought is very appealing. I imagine her on her knees before me… Cullen! Not Going To Happen.

"I want to deserve to possess them… but yes, bottom line… I do."

I could really take care of you.

"You sound like the ultimate consumer."

I know what I'd like to consume. Shit, I need a new sub… it's been what? Three weeks since Annette left? And look at me – I'm a mess, over this brown-haired girl. I try a smile and agree with her.

"You were adopted… how far do you think that's shaped the way you are?"

What the fuck has this got to do with the price of oil? I can feel my frown. What a ridiculous question… if I'd stayed with the crack-whore I'd probably be dead. I fob her off with a non-answer answer, trying to keep my voice level. But she pushes me on the subject, wanting to know my age. Shut her down, Cullen…

"This is all a matter of public record, Miss Swan." My voice is stern… she looks contrite. Good.

"You've had to sacrifice a family life for your work."

"That's not a question," I snap, and glower at her. Fucking hell…!

She flushes again, and bites down on that damned lip. Now I'd really like to fuck her mouth – that would shut her up. She has the grace to apologize.

"Have you had to sacrifice a family life for your work?"

What would *I* want with fucking family?

"I have a family. I have a brother and a sister and two loving parents. I'm not interested in extending my family beyond that."

"Are you gay, Mr Cullen?"

I inhale sharply – I cannot believe she's asked me that… the unspoken question that hovers over me where my family are concerned – much to my amusement. How *dare* she? I want to drag her out of her seat, bend her across my knee and spank the living shit out of her, then fuck her over my desk, with her hands tied tightly behind her back – that would answer her question. How frustrating is this female? I take a deep calming breath… and notice that she's acutely embarrassed by her own question. I feel a vindictive delight.

"No Isabella, I'm not." I raise my eyebrows at her but keep my expression impassive. Isabella… it's a lovely name. I like the way my tongue rolls round it.

"I apologize… it's, err… written here…" Hastily, nervously, she tucks her hair behind her ear.

She doesn't know her own questions…? Perhaps they're not hers. I ask her, drinking her in… she really is very attractive. Beautiful even.

"Err… no… Rose… Miss Hale – she compiled the questions."

"Are you colleagues on the student paper?"

"No… she's my room-mate."

I have to resist the urge to laugh. No wonder she's all over the place. I scratch my chin as I debate whether or not to give her a really, really hard time.

"Did you volunteer to do this interview?"

And I'm rewarded with her submissive look, all dark eyes and wary, nervous about my reaction. Good to know I unnerve her too.

"I was drafted… She's not well," she says softly.

"That explains a great deal."

There's a knock at the door, and Angela interrupts us.

"Mr Cullen – forgive me for interrupting, but your next meeting is in two minutes."

"We're not finished here, Angela. Please cancel my next meeting."

Angela hesitates, gazing at me. She's stunned. I stare at her – *Out! Now!* She flushes scarlet. Shit… I don't want another one reduced to tears and off. But she seems to recover herself.

"Very well, Mr Cullen," she mutters, and exits.

I turn my attention back to the intriguing creature on my couch.

"Where were we, Miss Swan?"

"Err… please don't let me keep you from anything."

But it's my turn now… see if I can uncover any of the secrets hidden in her dark eyes.

"I want to know about you, Miss Swan. I think that's only fair." As I lean forward her eyes widen slightly. Oh yes – the usual effect. Nice to know she's not oblivious to my charms.

"There's not much to know," she says, flushing again. Lord, I intimidate her.

"What are your plans after you graduate?"

She shrugs slightly. "I haven't made any plans Mr Cullen, I just need to get through my final exams."

"We run an excellent internship program here."

Fuck. Where are you going with this Cullen? Breaking a golden rule – never, ever fuck with the staff. She looks surprised, and her teeth sink into that lip again. It's so arousing… Why? I shift uncomfortably.

"Oh… I'll bear that in mind," she murmurs quietly, adding as an afterthought, "Though I'm not sure I'd fit in here…"

Why the hell not? What's wrong with my company? I ask straight out.

"Well, it's obvious, isn't it?"

"Not to me," I murmur – lost in her dark gaze. She's all flustered again and she reaches for the minidisk. Shit, she's going…

"Would you like me to show you round?"

Mentally I run through my schedule for this afternoon, nothing that won't keep.

"I'm sure you're far too busy, Mr Cullen, and I do have a long drive."

What? She's come all the way from Portland? She should be staying the night… I could certainly find a place for her to sleep.

"You're driving back to Portland?" I glance quickly out of the window. It's one hell of a drive and it's raining. "Well, you'd better drive carefully." Why the fuck should I care? She wants out – and quite right too. What the hell could I offer her?

"Did you get everything you need?" I add in an effort to prolong her stay.

"Yes sir…" she says quietly. Her response floors me – the way those words sound, coming out of that smart mouth. Briefly the image of what I'd like to do to that mouth flits through my mind, annoying and angering me. It ain't gonna happen, Cullen!

"Thank you for letting me interview you, Mr Cullen."

"The pleasure's been all mine," I respond truthfully. I haven't felt this fascinated by anyone in a long while, or this aroused – ever. The thought is unsettling, and the tempting image of her, bound and wanting, intrudes on my consciousness again.

She stands. Mirroring her actions I hold out my hand, eager for the contact with her skin.

"Until we meet again, Miss Swan," I murmur, my voice low, and she places her small hand in mine. This time, I feel a weird connection… Yes – I want this girl – preferably in my playroom. I swallow quickly, trying to suppress my very physical reaction to her touch.

"Mr Cullen." She nods at me, and I break the hold, moving to open the door.

Shit… I cannot let her leave with the upper hand. It's obvious that she wants out as quickly as possible. Irritation and inspiration hits me simultaneously.

"I'm just ensuring you make it through the door, Miss Swan."

On cue she flushes her delicious rosy pink – and again I wonder what her skin would look like heated from the harsh sting of a cane.

"Well, that's very considerate," she snaps at me.

Miss Swan has teeth! As she exits I grin behind her, and follow in her wake. Both Angela and Jessica look up in shock. Yeah, yeah – I'm just seeing the girl out.

"Did you have a coat?" I ask.

"Yes."

I glare at Jessica who immediately leaps up and retrieves a navy coat. Lord… this woman should be better dressed. I take the coat from Jessica, surprising her again, and giving her my 'I've got this' look. I hold it up for Miss Swan – though if I had my choice, I'd be undressing rather than dressing her. As I pull it over her slim shoulders, I touch her skin briefly, and she stills at the contact. Yes… she's affected by me – I am ridiculously pleased by the thought. Strolling over to the elevator I press the call button, while she stands fidgeting beside me. Oh, I could so stop you fidgeting, baby. The doors open and in she shoots, turning to face me.

"Isabella," I murmur in farewell.

"Edward," she replies, and the elevator doors close… and my name on her lips, sounds odd – unfamiliar – but sexy as hell… Well, fuck me. *What was that?* I need to know more about this girl.

"Angela," I snap as I head back into my office. "Get me Jenks on the line, now."

As I sit at my desk waiting for the call I gaze at the office paintings. And Miss Swan's words drift back to me: 'Raising the ordinary to extraordinary'. She could so easily have been talking about herself.

My phone buzzes.

"Jenks, I need a background check."

Outtake 2: Chapter 15 (part)

BPOV

I follow him into his study, a spacious room with another floor-to-ceiling window that opens out on to the balcony. He sits on the desk, motions for me to sit on a leather chair in front of him, and hands me a piece of paper.

"These are the rules… they may be subject to change. They form part of the contract, which you can also have. Read these rules and let's discuss."

RULES

Obedience**:** The Submissive will obey any instructions given by The Dominant immediately without hesitation or reservation and in an expeditious manner. The Submissive will agree to any sexual activity deemed fit and pleasurable by the Dominant excepting those activities which are outlined in hard limits (Appendix 2) She will do so eagerly and without hesitation.

Sleep**:** The Submissive will ensure she achieves a minimum of eight hours sleep a night when she is not with The Dominant.

Food**:** The Submissive will eat regularly to maintain her health and wellbeing from a prescribed list of foods (Appendix 4). The Submissive will not snack between meals, with the exception of fruit.

Clothes**:** During the Term the Submissive will wear clothing only approved by The Dominant. The Dominant will provide a clothing budget for The Submissive, which The Submissive shall utilize. The Dominant shall accompany the Submissive to purchase clothing on an ad hoc basis. If the Dominant so requires the Submissive shall during the Term any adornments the Dominant shall require, in the presence of the Dominant and any other time the Dominant deems fit.

Exercise**:** The Dominant shall provide The Submissive with a personal trainer four times a week in hour-long sessions at times to be mutually agreed between the personal trainer and The Submissive. The personal trainer will report to The Dominant on The Submissive's progress.

Personal Hygiene/Beauty: The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of The Dominant's choosing at times to be decided by The Dominant, and undergo whatever treatments The Dominant sees fit.

Personal Safety**:** The Submissive will not drink to excess, smoke, take recreational drugs or put herself in any unnecessary danger.

Personal Qualities: The Submissive will not enter into any sexual relations with anyone other than The Dominant. The Submissive will conduct herself in a respectful and modest manner at all times. She must recognize that her behaviour is a direct reflection on The Dominant. She shall be held accountable for any misdeeds, wrongdoings and misbehavior committed when not in the presence of the Dominant.

Failure to comply with any of the above will be result in immediate punishment, the nature of which shall be determined by The Dominant.

Holy Fuck.

"Hard limits?" I ask.

"Yes… what you won't do, what I won't do… we need to specify in our agreement."

"I'm not sure about accepting money for clothes. It feels wrong." I shift uncomfortably…. the word "ho" rattling round my head.

"I want to lavish money on you… let me buy you some clothes. I may need you to accompany me to functions and I want you dressed well. I'm sure your salary, when you do get a job, won't cover the kind of clothes I'd like you to wear."

"I don't have to wear them when I'm not with you?"

"No…"

"Okay…" *Think of them as uniform…*

"I don't want to exercise four times a week."

"Isabella, I need you supple, strong and with stamina. Trust me… You need to exercise."

"But surely not four times a week, how about three?"

"I want you to do four."

"I thought this was a negotiation?"

He purses his lips at me… "Okay, Miss Swan, another point well made. How about an hour on three days and one day half an hour?"

“Three days, three hours. I get the impression you‘re going to keep me exercised when I‘m here…”

He smiles wickedly, “Yes, I am. Okay, agreed. Are you sure you don‘t want to intern at my company? You‘re a good negotiator.”

“No, I don‘t think that‘s a good idea.” I stare down at his rules. W*axing… waxing what? Everything? Ugh…*

EPOV

“So, limits. These are mine.” I hand her the list. This is it, shit or bust time. I know my limits by heart and mentally tick off them off as I watch her read through.

She gets paler and paler as she nears the end. Oh Christ.

<u>Hard Limits</u>

No acts involving fire play

No acts involving urination or defecation and the products thereof

No acts involving needles, knives, piercing or blood

No acts involving children or animals

No acts that will leave any permanent marks on the skin

No acts involving breath control.

She swallows and glances nervously up at me, her dark eyes wide and round.

Fuck, I hope this doesn‘t scare her away – surely these limits demonstrate that I‘m not into any of the extreme shit. I cannot believe how anxious I feel. I‘ve never wanted anyone as much as I want this girl… I want her submission – crave her submission. Why, I don‘t know.

Ever since the interview she‘s been plaguing my mind, visions of her haunting my dreams: her biting her lip, tucking her hair behind her ear, her hesitant, musical voice, ringing in my head. What is it about her? I want to make this arrangement work. How can I persuade her to try? Say yes, Isabella, please.

“Is there anything you‘d like to add?” I keep my voice gentle, but hope she won‘t add anything. I want carte blanche with her. She stares at me, seemingly at a loss for words. It‘s… irritating. I am not used to waiting for answers. What is she thinking?

“Is there anything you won‘t do?” I prompt.

“I don‘t know.”

Not the response I‘m expecting.

“What do you mean you don‘t know?”

She shifts on her seat and looks uncomfortable.

“I‘ve never done anything like this…”

Christ, of course she hasn‘t! Patience, Cullen, for fuck‘s sake! You‘ve thrown a great deal of information at her.

“Well, when you‘ve had sex, was there anything that you didn‘t like doing?” I ask patiently. She flushes and my interest is piqued immediately. What has she done that she didn‘t like? Is she adventurous in bed? She seems so – inexperienced. Normally I don‘t find that attractive, but with her…

“You can tell me, Isabella. We have to be honest with each other, or this isn‘t going to work.” I really have to encourage her to loosen up – she won‘t even talk about sex. She‘s squirming again and staring at her fingers. Come on, Isabella.

“Tell me,” I order. Christ, she‘s frustrating sometimes.

“Well… I‘ve not had sex before… so I don‘t know.”

I gape at her as her words seep slowly into my consciousness. *Not had sex before*. Fuck. The earth stops spinning. I don‘t fucking believe it. How? Why? Fuck.

“Never?” I can hear the incredulity in my whisper. How can this beautiful girl be…?

She‘s shaking her head at me.

“You‘re a virgin?” I can‘t fucking believe it.

She nods, embarrassed. I close my eyes, unable to look at her. How the fuck did I get this so wrong? Shit… How the hell? Anger lances through me. What can I do with a fucking virgin? I glare at her as unexpected and unanticipated fury floods my mind.

"Why the fuck didn't you tell me?" I growl, and start to pace my study. What do I want with a fucking virgin? She shrugs apologetically, at a loss for words, reflecting my bewilderment. I stop pacing. Shit… she'll want to go.

"I don't understand why you didn't tell me." I can hear the exasperation in my voice. I've never fucked a virgin.

"The subject never came up," she mutters. "I'm not in the habit of revealing my sexual status to everybody I meet. I mean, we hardly know each other."

As ever, it's a fair point. I scowl. I can't believe I've given her the bus tour of my playroom… Thank fuck for the NDA. She peeks up at me.

"Well, you know a lot more about me now," I snap at her. "I knew you were inexperienced… but a *virgin!* Hell, Bella, I just showed you…" Christ, not only the playroom, my rules… hard limits. She knows nothing. How could I do this? "May God forgive me…"

And a startling thought occurs to me – our one kiss in the elevator, where I could have fucked her there and then – was that her first kiss?

"Have you ever been kissed, apart from by me?" *Please say yes.*

"Of course I have." She almost looks offended, but her brow furrows, forming the little v I like. Yeah, she's been kissed, but not often. And for some reason that I don't want to fathom, the thought is… pleasing.

"And a nice young man hasn't swept you off your feet? I just don't understand. You're twenty-one, nearly twenty-two. You're beautiful." Why hasn't some guy taken her to bed? Were all the boys she knew in college idiots? Were they blind? Fuck – perhaps she's religious. No, Jenks would have found that out at least. She gazes down at her fingers, and I think she's smiling, though at what I have no idea. She thinks this is funny! Christ, I could kick myself.

"And you're seriously discussing what I want to do, when you have no experience…" Words fail me. "How have you avoided sex? Tell me, please." I don't understand. She's in college, and from what I remember of college all the students were fucking like rabbits. All of them… except me. I had rowing, and Irina… the memory is a dark one and I push it aside to deal with the beautiful enigma sitting in front of me.

She shrugs, her small shoulders shaking slightly.

"No-one's really… you know…" She trails off.

No-one's what? Seen you for the attractive woman you are? No-one's lived up to your expectations – *and I do?* Fuck, she really does know nothing. How could she ever be a submissive if she has no idea? This is not going to work. I can see all my plans crumbling to dust.

"Why are you so angry with me?" she whispers.

I glare at her. Of course, she would think that. Cullen, sort this out.

"I'm not angry with you, I'm angry at myself. I just assumed…" *Why the fuck would I be angry with you?* What a fucking mess this is. I run my hands through my hair, trying to rein in my temper.

"Do you want to go?" I ask. *Please don't go.*

"No… unless you want me to go," she murmurs.

"Of course not. I like having you here." The statement surprises me as I say it. I *do* like having her here. Interacting with her. She's so… refreshing. And I want to fuck her, control her, beat her, and watch her alabaster skin pink beneath my hands. That's out of the question now – isn't it? Perhaps not the fucking… perhaps I could.

The thought is revelatory. I could take her to bed… Break her in. It would be a novel experience for both of us. Would she want to? She asked me earlier if I was going to make love to her. I could try, without tying her up. But she might touch me… *Fuck.* I glance down at my watch.

"It's late," I mutter. When I look back at her she's biting her lip. The sight of her small even white teeth pressed into her plump bottom lip is arousing. It stirs my groin.

Shit… I want her, still, in spite of her innocence. Could I take her to bed? Would she want to, knowing what she knows about me now? Christ, I have no idea. Do I just ask her?

"You're biting your lip." I mutter distractedly.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologize. It's just that I want to bite it too… hard."

Her breath hitches. Thank Fuck. It‘s my cue. She‘s aroused. Yes… I can do this. She wants it too – and my decision is made.

“Come,” I murmur, holding out my hand.

“What?”

“We‘re going to rectify the situation right now.” Put an end to your virginity.

“What do you mean? What situation?”

“Your situation. Bella, I‘m going to make love to you, now.”

“Oh.” She blinks at me. Shit – have I misread this again?

“That‘s if you want to… I mean, I don‘t want to push my luck.”

“I thought you didn‘t make love. I thought you fucked, hard,” she whispers, her voice all husky and breathy and so damned seductive, her eyes wide, pupils dilating. She‘s flushed with desire – she wants this too. She does. And from deep within I feel a wholly unexpected bubble of pleasure spread through me… and I grin at her.

“I can make an exception, or maybe combine the two, we‘ll see. I really want to make love to you. Please come to bed with me. I want our arrangement to work – but you really need to have some idea what you‘re letting yourself in for. We can start your training tonight, with the basics. This doesn‘t mean I‘ve come over all hearts and flowers – it‘s a means to an end, but one that I want, and hopefully you do too.” The words flood out in a torrent before I know what I‘m really saying. Shit, Cullen. Get a hold of yourself. This girl confounds me… every step of the way.

She blinks up at me and flushes. Come on, Bella, yes or no. I‘m dying here.

“But I haven‘t done all the things you require from your list of rules.” Her voice is hesitant. Afraid. I don‘t want her to be afraid… no.

“Forget about the rules. Forget about all that stuff for tonight. I want you. I‘ve wanted you since you fell into my office. And I know you want me. You wouldn‘t be sitting here calmly discussing punishment and hard limits if you didn‘t. I can be gentle… and I will. Please, Bella… spend the night with me.”

I hold out my hand to her again and this time she places her hand in mine. Pulling her up into my arms I hold her flush against my body. She gasps with surprise and I feel her against me… Christ I want her. She‘s so arousing. For such an innocent, how can that be? I‘ve given her so much to think about and she‘s still here. She‘s not running… and yet she

knows nothing. I wind my hand around her ponytail and tug gently so I can stare into her dark captivating eyes.

"You are one brave young woman," I whisper. "I am in awe of you." I lean down and very gently kiss her, then pull her lower lip with my teeth. "I want to bite this lip." I tug harder and she moans. My cock hardens instantly in response. "Please Bella… let me make love to you," I whisper against her mouth.

"Yes," she whispers – and my body lights up like Christmas. I can barely suppress my moan. Christ, get a grip, Cullen. I beam down at her… Whoa. A yes, a yes, from little virgin Bella, I can't believe it. We have no arrangement in place, no limits set, she's not mine to do with as I please – and yet I feel… excited. Aroused. It's such an unfamiliar, yet exhilarating feeling… desire for this woman coursing through me. Vanilla sex… Can I do this? Fuck – yes, I can.

Without another word I lead her out of my study, through the drawing room and along the corridor to my bedroom. She follows, her hand tightly holding mine. Contraception – fuck. I have some condoms… in my bedside table, yeah. I'm sure she's not on the pill or anything. At least I don't have to worry about every dick she's slept with. I release her by the bed, walk over to my chest of drawers, and take off my watch and my shoes and socks. She gazes at me, her dark eyes impossibly large in her small beautiful face. I feel a moment's hesitation. This is supposed to be a big deal for her… isn't it? I remember my first time, and what a heaven-sent relief it was. I'm sure she won't feel that way. I don't want to question my motives, I don't want to analyze why I'm doing this. Deep down I know I should send her home. But the simple truth is, I don't want her to go, and I desire her. What's more, I can see my desire reflected in her expression.

"Do you want the blinds drawn?" I ask.

"I don't mind," she whispers. "I thought you didn't let anyone sleep in your bed."

I want to snort… *sleep?*

"Who says we're going to sleep?" I murmur.

"Oh…" she says, her lips forming a perfect small 'o'. My cock hardens. Yes, I'd like to fuck that mouth, that 'o'. I stroll towards her like she's my prey. Oh baby, I want to bury myself in you. I stand in front of her, looking down into her wide dark eyes. Her breathing is shallow and quick. She's flushed… wary, but excited. It makes me feel so powerful. She has no idea what I am going to do to her… Well, I'm going to undress you now, Miss Swan.

"Let's get this jacket off shall we?" Reaching up I gently push her jacket off her shoulders, fold it and place it on my chair.

“Do you have any idea how much I want you, Bella Swan?”

She gasps, and I reach up to touch her cheek with my fingertips. Her skin is petal soft. I run my fingers down to her chin. She gazes at me… lost… under my spell. She‘s already mine. The thought is intoxicating.

“Do you have any idea what I‘m going to do to you?” I murmur, and grasp her chin between my thumb and forefinger. Leaning down I kiss her firmly, molding her lips to mine. She‘s soft and sweet and willing… I need to see her, all of her. I make quick work of her buttons, slowly peeling off her blouse and letting it fall to the floor. I stand back to gaze at her. She‘s wearing a pale blue bra… the one Taylor bought… Fuck, she‘s beautiful.

“Oh Bella. You have the most beautiful skin, pale and flawless. I want to kiss every single inch of it.” There‘s not a mark on her. The thought is unsettling. I want to see her marked… pink… welts from my crop maybe.

She flushes her delicious rose color, embarrassed no doubt. If I do nothing else, I shall teach her not be shy of her beautiful body. Reaching up I pull her hair tie, freeing her hair. It tumbles in a glorious, lush, chestnut cloud around her face, down to her breasts.

“Hmm… I really like brunettes,” I murmur. She is very, very lovely, a precious jewel. I frown inwardly at the thought. Flowery, Cullen. I grasp her head, running my fingers through her soft hair, and pull her to me, kissing her. She moans against me and parts her lips allowing me access to her warm wet mouth. The sweet appreciative noise echoes through me – right the way to the end of my cock. Fuck. Her tongue shyly meets mine, hesitantly probing my mouth and for some reason, her fumbling inexperience is fucking hot.

She tastes delectable. Wine, grapes and Isabella Swan – a potent, heady mix of flavors. I fold my arms around her tightly, noting with relief that she grips my upper arms and shows no sign of moving them. One hand in her hair, holding her in place, I trail my other hand down her spine to her ass and push her against me, against my hardening erection. She moans again. I continue to kiss her, coaxing her unschooled tongue to explore my mouth, as I explore hers. Bravely she moves her hands up my arms – for a split second, I worry where she‘s going to touch me – she caresses my cheek then strokes my hair. This is beginning to unnerve me. She twists her fingers in my hair, pulling gently… Christ, that feels good. I groan in response but can‘t let her continue. I push her towards and against the bed.

Before she can touch me again I drop to my knees. I want her out of these jeans – I want to unsettle her, keep her hands off me and arouse her yet more. I grasp her hips and run my tongue just north of the waistband of her jeans, up to her navel. She gasps. Fuck, does she smell and taste good. Her hands fist in my hair once more, though this I don‘t mind — in

fact I like it. I nip her hipbone and she groans. I gaze up at her flushed face. Her eyes are closed, her mouth slack, and she's panting. She blinks and opens her eyes and we gaze at each other as I reach up and undo the button on her jeans. Very slowly I ease down the zipper and move my hands round her ass. Slipping my hands inside the waistband, my palms against the soft cheeks of her behind, I slide her jeans off.

And I can't stop myself. I want to shock her… I want to test her boundaries right now. Not taking my eyes off hers, I deliberately lick my lips, then lean forward and run my nose, inhaling her arousal, up the center of her panties. Closing my eyes I savor her. Christ, she smells enticing…

"You smell so good." Fuck, I need to get out of my jeans. I push her gently on to the bed and she falls backwards, her hair a wild halo around her. Grasping her right foot I make quick work of removing her sneaker and sock, and rub my thumbnail along her instep. She writhes gratifyingly on the bed and gasps. She's watching me, fascinated. Leaning forward I run my tongue up her instep, following the little red welt that my thumbnail has left in its wake. She falls back on the bed, eyes closed, groaning loudly. I can't help but chuckle.

"Oh Bella… what I could do to you." I whisper as images of her writhing beneath me flit through my consciousness: in my playroom, strapped to my four-poster bed, to the table – to the cross. I could tease and torture her until she begged for release… the images make my jeans even fucking tighter. Fuck. I quickly remove her remaining shoe and sock, then stand and pull off her jeans. She's almost naked on my bed, her hair framing her face perfectly, her long, pale legs stretched out invitingly in front of me. The thought that I've never fucked anyone in my bed comes unbidden to my mind… another first with Miss Swan, Cullen. I have to make allowances for her inexperience. She gazes up at me, panting. Wanting.

"You are very beautiful, Isabella Swan. I can't wait to be inside you," I murmur. I want to tease her some more, find out what she does know.

"Show me how you pleasure yourself," I ask, gazing intently down at her.

She frowns. Fuck, I want to beat this shyness out of her.

"Don't be coy, Bella… show me," I whisper.

She shakes her head, blinking slightly.

"I don't know what you mean."

"How do you make yourself come…? I want to see."

Her mouth forms the perfect 'o' again… but she's silent and shakes her head.

"I don't," she mutters breathlessly.

I gaze at her as I try and process her words. Fuck, even I used to masturbate, before Irina got hold of me. Shit! She's probably never had an orgasm. Fuck… her first fuck, her first orgasm – I'd better make this good.

"Oh… well… we'll have to see what we can do about that." I'm going to make you come like a fucking freight train, baby. Christ – she's probably never seen a naked man either. Not taking my eyes off hers I undo the top button on my jeans and ease them on to the floor. I can't risk taking my shirt off… *but if she did touch me… it wouldn't be so bad… would it?* Before I allow myself to be caught up in that hideous thought I lean down, and grasping her ankles, spread her legs. Her eyes widen and her hands curl around my sheets. I crawl slowly up the bed, between her legs. She squirms.

"Keep still," I murmur and lean down to kiss the soft, pale skin of her inner thigh. I trail kisses up her thighs, over her panties, across her belly, nipping and sucking as I go. She writhes beneath me.

"We're going to have to work on keeping you still, baby." *If you let me*. I can teach you to just absorb the pleasure, and not move. Intensifying every touch, every kiss, every bite. The thought alone is enough to make me want to bury myself in her… but I want to know how responsive she is. She hasn't held back. She's letting me have free rein over her body. She's not hesitated at all. The thought is gratifying. She wants this… she really fucking wants this too. I dip my tongue into her navel then continue my leisurely journey north, savoring her. I shift, lying beside her, one leg still between hers. My hand ghosts up her body, over her hip, up her waist, on to her breast. Very gently I cup her breast, trying to gauge her reaction. She doesn't stiffen. She doesn't stop me… she trusts me. Can I extend her trust in me to let me have dominion over her body… over her? The idea is exhilarating.

"You fit my hand perfectly, Isabella…" I dip my finger into the cup of her bra and jerk it down, freeing her breast. Her nipples are small, rose pink, and they're already hard. I pull the cup down so that the under-wire rests under her breast forcing it upwards. I repeat the process with the other cup and watch fascinated as her nipples grow under my steady gaze. Christ… I haven't even touched her yet.

"Very nice," I whisper appreciatively, and blow gently on the nearest nipple, watching in delight as it hardens and elongates. Isabella closes her eyes and arches her back. Keep still baby, just absorb the pleasure… it will feel so much more intense. Blowing on one nipple, I roll the other very gently between my thumb and forefinger. She grasps the sheets tightly… I lean down and suck – hard. Her body bows again and she cries out.

"Let's see if we can make you come like this…" I whisper, and I don't stop.

Bella starts to whimper. Oh yes baby… feel this. Her nipples extend further and she starts grinding her hips, round and round. Keep still, baby… I will teach you to keep still.

"Oh…please…" she begs. Her legs stiffen… it's working. She's close. I continue my lascivious assault. Concentrating on just these areas of her body is driving her and me to distraction. Christ, I want her…

"Let go, baby," I murmur, and pull her nipple with my teeth. She cries out as she comes… Yes! I move quickly to kiss her, taking her cries into my mouth. She's breathless and panting. Lost… mine. I own her first orgasm… I am ridiculously pleased by the thought.

"You are so responsive. You're going to have to learn to control this– and it's going to be so much fun teaching you how" I can't wait for that… but right now, I want her. All of her. I kiss her once more and let my hand travel down her body, down to her sex. I hold her, feeling her heat. Slipping my index finger through the lace of her panties I slowly circle round her… fuck, she's soaking.

"You're so deliciously wet. God, I want you." I thrust my finger inside her, and she cries out. She's hot and tight, slick and wet. I groan low in my throat and thrust into her again, absorbing her cries into my mouth. I press my palm on her clitoris… pushing down… pushing round. She cries out and writhes beneath me. Fuck, I want her – now. Sitting up I drag her panties off, then my boxers, and reach for a condom. I kneel up between her legs, pushing them further apart. Isabella gazes at me, with what…? Trepidation? She's probably never seen an erect penis before. Fuck…

"Don't worry. You expand too," I mutter. Stretching out over her I put my hands on either side of her head, taking my weight on my elbows. God, I want her… one final warning.

"You really want to do this?" I ask. *For fuck"s sake please don"t say no.*

"Please…" she begs.

"Pull your knees up," I order. This'll be easier. Christ, have I ever been so aroused? I can barely contain myself. I don't get it. It's her… why? Cullen, focus! I position myself so I can take her at my whim, and gaze down at her. Her eyes are open wide, imploring me. She really wants this… as much as I do.

"I'm going to fuck you now, Miss Swan. Hard," I whisper, and with one final glance at her dark imploring expression I surrender and succumb to my overwhelming need to possess her. One thrust and I'm inside her. F. U. C. K. I feel her convulse around me. She's so fucking tight. She cries out. Fuck… I've hurt her. I want to move… to lose myself in her… it takes all my restraint to stop.

"You're so tight… You okay?" I gaze down at her anxiously and she nods quickly, her eyes wide. She feels like fucking heaven on earth. She's so tight around me. I have wanted her for so long. This desire, this… *passion?* It's such a new feeling. I want so much from her… her submission – I want her to be mine, but right now… I'm hers. Fuck. I ease back slowly, and it's such an exquisite feeling… her, tight around my cock. Her beneath me… as I claim her body… knowing no one has before. Her trust in me – it's suddenly overwhelming, and I start to move… I want her to come. I will not stop until she comes. I want to own this woman. Want to feel her clenching around me. Fuck – she starts meeting every thrust. Following my rhythm. This is bliss. "See how well we fit together, Isabella?" I grasp her head, holding her in place while I claim her body, and kiss her hard, claiming her mouth. She stiffens beneath me… fuck yes. Her orgasm is close.

"Come for me, Bella," I whisper, and she cries out as she's consumed, tipping her head back, her mouth open, her eyes closed… and just the sight of her ecstasy is enough. I explode into her, losing all sense and reason, as I call out her name and come, violently, inside her.

Outtake 3: Excerpt from Chapter 51

BPOV

"We're here because you said yes, Isabella. And you ran from me. I am going to hit you six times and you will count with me."

Why the hell doesn't he just get on with it…? He always makes such a meal of punishing me… I roll my eyes, knowing full well he can't see me.

He lifts the hem of my bathrobe… and for some reason this feels more intimate than being naked. He gently caresses my behind, running his warm hand all over both cheeks and down to the tops of my thighs.

"I am doing this so that you remember not to run from me… and as exciting as it is… I never want you to run from me," he whispers.

And the irony is not lost on me… I was running to avoid this. If he'd opened his arms, I'd run to him… not away from him.

"And you rolled your eyes at me. You know how I feel about that." Suddenly it's gone… that nervous edgy fear in his voice… he's back from wherever he's been. I can feel it in his tone, in the way he places his fingers on my back, holding me – I can feel the atmosphere in the room change.

I close my eyes, bracing myself for the blow… and it comes hard, snapping across my backside, and the bite of the belt is everything I feared… I cry out, involuntarily, and take a huge gulp of air.

"Count, Isabella!" he commands.

"One!" I shout at him and it sounds like an expletive.

He hits me again… and the pain pulses and echoes along the line of the belt… *holy shit… that smarts.*

"Two!" I scream… if feels so good to scream.

I can hear his breathing… ragged, harsh. Whereas mine is almost non-existent as I desperately scrabble around my psyche looking for some internal strength. The belt cuts into my flesh again.

"Three…!" Tears spring unwelcome into my eyes. Jeez – this is harder than I thought – so much harder than the spanking. He's not holding anything back.

"Four!" I yell as the belt bites me again, and now the tears are streaming down my face. I don't want to cry. It angers me that I am crying.

He hits me again.

"Five…" My voice is more a choked strangled sob and in this moment I think I hate him. One more, I can do one more. My backside feels as if it's on fire…

EPOV

"Six," Bella whispers, her voice forced and hoarse. I drop the belt, savoring my sweet, euphoric release. I feel punch drunk, breathless and finally replete. Oh, this beautiful girl, my beautiful girl. I want to kiss every inch of her body. I reach for her, pulling her into my arms.

"Let go. No – " And she struggles out of my grasp, scrambling away from me, pushing and shoving and finally turning on me like a seething wildcat.

"Don't touch me!" she hisses.

Her face is blotchy and smeared with tears, her nose is running and her hair is a shocking dark cloud around her, but she has never looked so magnificent… and at the same time so angry.

She's mad. Really mad. Okay, I hadn't figured on anger. Give her a moment. She furiously dashes away her tears with the back of hands, glaring at me.

"This is what you really like? Me, like this?" She wipes her nose with the sleeve of the bathrobe. I blink at her, bemused, completely helpless and paralyzed by her reaction. The crying I know, I understand, but this anger, this rage – though it resonates with me on some level that I don't want to think about right now – I just don't comprehend. Why didn't she ask me to stop? She didn't safe-word. She deserved to be punished. She ran from me. She rolled her eyes. This is it – this is what happens when you defy me, baby. But my momentary euphoria has vanished, evaporated, because of the appalled raging hurt I can see in her beautiful brown eyes.

Shit! What I have I done? It's sobering. I'm balanced on a precipice, teetering at the edge of a dark yawning chasm. I gaze at her, desperately searching for the words to make this right, and my mind is blank.

"Well, you are one fucked-up son of a bitch," she snaps.

All the breath leaves my body, and it's like she's whipped me with a belt… *Fuck!*

"Bella," I whisper, pleading with her. I want her to stop. I want to hold her and make the pain go away. I want her to sob in my arms.

"Don't you dare Bella me! You need to sort your shit out, Cullen!" she snarls at me. And she strides past me, out of the playroom, quietly shutting the door behind her.

I stare at the closed door, her words ringing in my ears.

You are one fucked-up son of a bitch. Sort your shit out!

No-one has ever walked out on me… What the fuck? Mechanically I run my hand through my hair trying to rationalize her reaction, and mine. I just let her go… I'm not mad… I'm… what?

I stoop to pick up the belt, walk to the wall and hang it on its peg. That was, without doubt, one of the most satisfying, fulfilling moments in my life. I feel lighter, a weight lifted, that doubt between us gone. It's done. We're there. Now that she knows what's involved, we can move on. Adapt that fucking contract.

Then why do I feel such a sense of unease? Her reaction… the image of her injured, haunted look, is back, unwelcome, in my mind's eye. It's unsettling. I am used to seeing women cry – it's what I do. But Bella… Maybe it's because she hasn't signed on the dotted line. I sink to the floor and lean my head against the wall, my arms on my bent knees. Just let her cry. She'll feel better for crying. Women do, in my experience. Give her a moment, then go and offer her some aftercare. She didn't safe-word. She asked me. She wanted to know, curious as ever. It's just been a rude awakening, that's all.

You are one fucked-up son of a bitch.

Closing my eyes, I smile wryly. Yes, Bella, yes I am, and now you know. Now we can move forward with our… relationship, arrangement. Whatever this is.

My thoughts don't comfort me. I feel the sense of unease spawning, deep down, obliterating the short-lived euphoria. Her dark eyes glaring at me, outraged, accusatory… *pitying*... as if the scales have finally fallen from her eyes and she can see me for the monster that I am. Banner springs to mind. *Don't dwell on the negative, Edward.*

I close my eyes once more. Her lovely wounded face dances through my mind. What a fool I am. This was too soon. I'll reassure her. Yes. Let her cry, then reassure her. I was angry with her for running from me. Why did she do that? Hell, it was exciting though. And I'm angry with Lauren. Where the fuck is she? What the fuck is she doing?

I stand up. I need to face Bella, hold her – we'll get through this. I wonder where she is. Shit! Panic seizes me. Suppose she's gone? No – she wouldn't do that. Not without saying goodbye, surely.

I tear down the stairs. She's not in the drawing room… She must be in bed. I dash to my bedroom.

The bed is empty… *shit!* Anxiety blooms in the pit of my belly. No – she can't have gone! Upstairs… I take the stairs three at a time and pause, breathless, outside her bedroom, relief flooding through me. I can hear her soft cries. I lean my head against the door, overwhelmed by my relief. Shit… I realise in this moment how horrific the thought of her leaving is. Of course… she just needs to cry.

Taking a steadying breath, I turn and head to the bathroom beside the playroom to fetch some arnica cream, Advil and a glass of water. I take a deep breath and head into Bella's room.

It's still dark, though dawn is a whisper in the sky, and it takes me a moment to find my beautiful girl. She's curled up in the middle of the bed. She looks so small…. I feel winded, gazing at her as she sobs softly. The sound of her grief rips through me. I don't understand. My subs never affected me like this – even when they were bawling. I don't get it. Putting down the arnica, water and tablets I lift the duvet and slide in beside her.

I just don't get it… why do I feel so fucking lost? I reach for her and she stiffens, her whole body screaming, *don't touch me!*

"Hush," I breathe to calm her, in a vain attempt to halt her tears. She doesn't respond. She remains frozen, unyielding.

"Don't fight me Bella, please," I whisper, and she relaxes slightly, letting me pull her into my arms and bury my nose in her wonderfully fragrant hair. She smells as intoxicating as ever, her sweet scent such a soothing balm to my nerves. And because her neck is exposed, I kiss her gently.

"Don't hate me," I plead, as I run my lips down her smooth white throat, tasting her. She says nothing, but slowly her crying dissipates into soft sniffling sobs. Finally she's quiet. I think she might have fallen asleep, but I cannot bring myself to move and check in case I disturb her. At least she's calmer now.

Dawn comes and goes, and the soft light gets brighter, intruding into the room as morning moves on… and still we lie quietly.

She moves, a slight twitch in her feet, and I know she's awake.

"I bought you some advil and some arnica cream," I murmur, and finally she responds, turning slowly in my arms to face me. Pain-riven dark eyes focus on mine, her look intense, questioning. She takes her time to really scrutinize me. It's unnerving because I have, as usual, no idea what she's thinking. She's definitely calmer… and I feel a small spark of relief. Today might be a good day after all.

She reaches up to caress my cheek, running her fingers along my jaw line, tickling my stubble. I close my eyes, savoring her touch. It's still so new, this sensation, enjoying her innocent little fingers gently stroking my face.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

Her softly-spoken words surprise and puzzle me. She's apologizing to me? Why? For running, for eye-rolling?

"What for?"

"What I said."

I can feel the relief coursing through my body. She's forgiven me. Besides, what she said in anger was right… I am a fucked-up son of a bitch.

"You didn't tell me anything I didn't know." And for the first time in so many years I find myself apologizing.

"I am sorry I hurt you."

She shrugs almost nonchalantly. I've won a reprieve… We're safe. We're okay.

"I asked for it."

I feel like snorting, with relieved agreement. You sure did, baby. She swallows nervously.

"I don't think I can be everything you want me to be," she whispers, her eyes wide with heartfelt sincerity.

The world stops. Fuck… We're not safe at all. Cullen, make this right.

"You are everything I want you to be."

Her brow furrows, creating the small v above her nose. Her eyes are red-rimmed and she's so pale… the palest I've ever seen her. It stirs me.

"I don't understand," she whispers. "I'm not obedient, and you can be as sure as hell I'm not going to let you do *that* to me again. And that's what you need – you said so."

And there it is … her coup de grace. Fuck. I pushed too far. Now she knows – and all the arguments I had with myself before I embarked on my pursuit of this girl flood back to me.

She's not into the lifestyle. How can I corrupt her this way? She's too young, too innocent… too… Bella. Fuck. I close my eyes – I can't bear to look at her. She would be better off without me. Now that she's seen the monster, she knows she can't contend with him. I have to free her – let her go her own way. She's right, this won't work between us. Focus, Cullen.

"You're right. I should let you go. I am no good for you."

Her eyes widen and if it's possible she looks even paler.

"I don't want to go," she whispers. Tears pool in her eyes, glistening on her long dark lashes.

"I don't want you to go either," I murmur, because it's the truth. The tears trickle down her cheeks once more. Gently I wipe away a falling tear with my thumb, and before I know it the words are out…

"I've come alive since I met you." I trace my thumb along her bottom lip. I want to kiss her, hard. Make her forget. Dazzle her. Arouse her – I know I can. But something holds me back. The wary, scared look in her dark daunted eyes. Why would she want to be kissed by a monster? She might push me away… and I don't know if I can deal with any more rejection. Her words haunt me… pulling at some dark forgotten memory.

You are one fucked-up son of a bitch.

"Me too," she whispers. "I've fallen in love with you, Edward."

I remember Carlisle teaching me to dive. My toes curled around the edge of the pool and I fell arching into the water… and now I'm falling once more… into the abyss. There's no way she can feel that about me. Not me. No! It's like she's strangling me with those words – those seven words leave me choking for air. I can't hear them. I can't deal with them. She doesn't know what she's talking about, who she's dealing with – what she's dealing with.

"No." I can hear the raw disbelief in my voice. "You can't love me, Bella… no. That's wrong."

I need to set her right on this. She cannot love a monster. She needs to go. She needs out – and in an instant everything becomes blindingly clear. This is my Eureka moment – I can't make her happy. I can't be what she needs. I can't let this go on. This has to finish. It should never have started.

"Wrong? Why's it wrong?"

"Well, look at you. I can't make you happy." And I can hear the anguish in my voice as I sink deeper and deeper into the dark of the abyss, shrouded in despair.

"But you do make me happy," she says frowning, not comprehending.

Isabella Swan… baby, look at yourself. I have to be honest with her.

"Not at the moment. Not doing what I want to do."

She blinks at me, her long lashes batting over her large, wounded eyes, studying me intently, searching for answers.

"We'll never get past that, will we?" she whispers after a moment. I shake my head because I can't think of anything else to say. It comes down to incompatibility… again.

She closes her eyes as if in pain. And when she opens them again, they are clear, full of resolve. Her tears have dried. And I can feel the blood pounding through my head. Fuck… my heart is working overtime. I know what she's going to say. I dread what she's going to say.

"Well… I'd better go, then," she murmurs and winces as she sits up.

Now? She can't go now.

"No, don't go." I am free-falling, deeper and deeper. Her leaving feels like a monumental mistake. My mistake. But she can't stay if she feels this way about me… she just can't.

"There's no point in me staying," she says sadly and slowly clambers out of the bed. She's really fucking going – I can't believe it. I scramble out of bed to stop her. But her look halts me in my tracks – her expression is so bleak, so cold, so distant. Not my Isabella at all.

"I'm going to get dressed. I'd like some privacy," she says. How flat and empty her voice sounds as she turns and leaves, shutting the door gently behind her. I gape at the closed door, lost. This is the second time she's walked out on me in one day.

I put my head in my hands, trying to calm myself, trying to rationalize my feelings. *She loves me?* I can barely think the words, they're so alien and repugnant to me. How? How? How did this happen?

Cullen, you fucking fool. Wasn't this always a risk with someone like her? Someone so good, someone so innocent, someone so… courageous. That she'd not see the real me until it was too late… that I would make her suffer – like this?.

I feel like I've punctured a lung. Christ, why is this so fucking painful? I follow her out of the door. She might want privacy, but if she's leaving me I need to be dressed.

She's in the shower when I reach my room. Quickly I pull on jeans and a t-shirt, noting wryly that they are black – very suitable for my mood. Grabbing my Blackberry I wander disconsolately into my drawing room, tempted to sit at the piano and hammer out some woeful lament. But I just stand in the middle of the room feeling… vacant. Focus, Cullen! This is the right decision. Let her go.

My Blackberry buzzes. It's Jenks. Has he found Lauren?

"Jenks," I snap.

"Mr Cullen, I have news," his voice rasps down the phone. Christ, this guy should stop smoking. He sounds like Deep Throat.

"You found her?" My spirits lift a little.

"No, Sir."

"What is it then?" *Why the fuck have you called?*

"Lauren left her husband. He finally admitted it to me – he's washed his hands of her."

This is news. I knew she'd married. But she said nothing about having left her husband to the psych or to Gail when she was admitted to hospital.

"I see."

"He has an idea where she might be – but he wants his palm greased. Wants to know who's so interested in his wife. Though that's not what he called her."

Anger surges through me.

"How much does he want?'

"He said a couple of grand."

"He said what?" I shout. That fucker – I knew it! Why didn't he just admit earlier that Lauren had walked out on him?

"Well, he could have told us the fucking truth. What's his number, I need to call him. Jenks, this is a real fuck-up."

I glance up, and Bella is standing awkwardly at the entrance of the drawing room, gazing at me. She's dressed in jeans and an ugly sweat top. Pale as fuck, all big brown eyes and tight, pinched face, her suitcase beside her.

"Find her," I snap, hanging up. I'll deal with Jenks later.

Bella walks purposefully over to the couch and from her backpack removes the Mac, her Blackberry, and the key to her car. Taking a deep breath she strides to the kitchen and lays all three items on the breakfast bar.

Christ, she's returning her things. She turns to face me, determination clear on her small ashen face. Her stubborn look… I know it well.

"I need the money that Taylor got for my truck." Her voice is small and calm, a monotone.

Fuck! I can't believe she's giving them back to me.

"Bella, I don't want those things – they're yours," I mutter in disbelief. She can't do this to me. "Please, take them."

"No Edward. I only accepted them under sufferance, and I don't want them any more."

"Bella, be reasonable!" I snap at her.

"I don't want anything that will remind me of you. I need a clean break. And I need the money that Taylor got for my truck." Her voice is devoid of emotion.

She wants to forget me. Fuck… pain sears through me, like she's punched a hole in my gut.

I gasp at its intensity.

"Are you really trying to wound me?"

"No, I am not. I am trying to protect myself." She whispers blinking at me and suddenly radiating anxiety.

Of course – she's trying to protect herself from the monster.

"Please Bella, take that stuff."

Her lips are so pale.

"Edward, I don't want to fight – I just need that money." Her voice is steady. How can she be so calm?

Rage courses through me. Money… it always comes down to the fucking money.

"Will you take a check?" I hiss at her.

"Yes. I think you're good for it."

I scowl at her. She wants fucking money, I'll give her money. I stalk angrily into my study and sitting at my desk take out my checkbook. I quickly scrawl a check… I'm so fucking angry in this moment. I double the amount that Taylor got for the fucking death trap and stuff the check into an envelope. I buzz Taylor. He answers immediately.

"Mr Cullen."

"Will you take Miss Swan home?" I snarl.

"Sir." He acquiesces immediately, as I knew he would.

When I return she's still standing by the kitchen island… lost, almost childlike. I hand her the envelope, my anger evaporating at the sight of her.

"Taylor got a good price… it's a classic," I mumble apologetically. "You can ask him. He'll take you home." I nod to where Taylor is waiting in the entrance of the drawing room.

"That's fine, I can get myself home, thank you."

No! Accept the fucking ride Bella. Why does she do this?

"Are you going to defy me at every turn?"

"Why change a habit of a lifetime?" she shrugs, mumbling apologetically.

That's it in a nutshell – why our arrangement was doomed from the start. She's just not cut out for this – and deep, deep down, I always knew it. I close my eyes. I am such a fucking fool. I try a softer approach, pleading with her.

"Please, Bella. Let Taylor take you home."

"I'll get the car, Miss Swan," Taylor announces authoritatively. I nod at him. Maybe she'll listen to him. She glances round, but he's gone, down to the basement to fetch the Merc.

She turns back to me, her eyes wider all of a sudden. And I hold my breath. I really can't believe she's going. This is the last time I'll see her… and she looks so sad. It cuts through me that I'm responsible for that look. I step forward. I want to hold her one more time… plead with her to stay.

And she slices through me once more by stepping back. I stop in my tracks. She doesn't want me. I have driven her away.

"I don't want you to go," I murmur.

"I can't stay. I know what I want… and you can't give it to me, and I can't give you what you need."

Oh please, Bella – let me hold you one more time. Smell your sweet, sweet scent. Feel you in my arms. I step towards her again. But she holds up her hands, halting me.

"Don't – please." She recoils, panic etched on her face. Yes. She should recoil from me.

"I can't do this," she mutters.

She grabs her suitcase and her backpack and heads for the foyer. I follow meekly and helplessly in her wake, my eyes fixed on her small retreating figure.

In the foyer I call the elevator. I can't take my eyes off her… her small elfin face, those lips, the way her dark lashes fan out and cast a shadow over her pale, pale cheeks. Words fail me as I try to memorize every detail of her lovely face. I have no dazzling lines, no quick wit, no arrogant commands. I have nothing, nothing but an enormous void yawning in my gut. The doors open and Bella heads straight in. She glances round at me – and for a moment her mask slips, and I can see my pain reflected on her beautiful face. *No… Bella… Don't Go.*

"Goodbye, Edward," she murmurs.

"Bella… goodbye," I whisper.

The doors close and she's gone. I sink slowly to the floor and put my head in my hands. The void is now cavernous and aching, overwhelming me. Cullen… *what the fuck have you done?*

~o~

I gaze up at the paintings, my Madonnas. They bring a mirthless smile to my lips, the idealization of motherhood. All of them gazing at their infants or staring inauspiciously down at me.

Yes, be inauspicious. I've just let the best thing that ever happened to me walk out of my life. She's gone. She's really fucking gone. I can't believe it. When she said she'd never leave… she promised me she'd never leave. I close my eyes, cutting out those pitying stares, and tip my head back against the wall. Okay, she said it in her sleep – and like the fucking fool I am, I believed her. But this is for the best. I've always known deep down I was no good for her, and she was too good for me. Why do I feel like shit… why is this so fucking painful?

The ping of the elevator's arrival forces my eyes open again as my heart leaps into my mouth… She's back. I sit paralyzed. Taylor steps out and freezes, gazing down at me. He recovers himself almost immediately. Shit. How long have I been sitting here?

"Miss Swan is home, Mr Cullen," he says, as if he addresses me while I'm prostrate on the floor everyday.

"How was she?" I mutter dispassionately, although I really want to know.

"Upset, sir," he says, showing no emotion whatsoever.

I nod, dismissing him. But he doesn't leave.

"Can I get you anything, sir?" he asks, much too kindly for my liking.

"No." Go… leave me the fuck alone.

"Sir," he says, and he leaves me slouched on my foyer floor.

Much as I'd like to sit here all day and wallow in my despair, I can't. I want an update from Jenks and I need to call Lauren's fucker of a husband. And I need a shower… perhaps this agonized feeling will wash away in the shower.

As I stand, I touch the wooden table that dominates the foyer, my fingers absentmindedly running over its exquisitely delicate marquetry. I'd have liked to fuck Miss Swan over this. I close my eyes, seeing her sprawled over this table, her head held back, chin up, mouth open in ecstasy, and her luscious hair spilling over the edge. Shit, it makes me hard just thinking about it… fuck. The pain in my gut twists and tightens. She's gone, Cullen. Get used to it. And drawing on years of enforced control I bring my body to heel.

The shower is blistering, the temperature just a notch below painful, the way I like it. I stand beneath the cascade trying to forget her, hoping this heat will scorch her out of my head, wash her scent off my body. If she's going to leave, there's no coming back. Never. I scrub my hair with grim determination. She's going to fuck off, then that's it. Good riddance. And I gasp, feeling another swift kick to my gut. No. Not good riddance. I raise my face to the streaming water. I am going to miss her. It's not good riddance at all. I lean my forehead against the tiles. Just last night… she was in here with me. I stare at my hands, my fingers unconsciously caressing the line of grout in the tiles where only yesterday her hands were braced against the wall… Fuck this.

Switching off the water I step out of the shower cubicle. As I wrap a towel around my waist, a distressing thought occurs to me: each day will be darker and longer, because she's no longer in it. No more facetious, witty emails. No more of her smart mouth. No more curiosity. Her beautiful dark eyes will no longer gaze at me in thinly veiled amusement… or shock… or lust… I stare at the ashen-faced jerk staring back at me in the bathroom mirror.

"What the fuck have you done, asshole?" I sneer at him. He mouths the words back at me with vitriolic contempt. And then the fucker blinks at me… big green eyes filled with ill-concealed raw misery.

"She's better off without you. You can't be what she wants. You can't give her what she needs. She wants hearts and flowers. She deserves better than you… you fucked-up prick." I turn away from the mirror, repulsed by the image glowering back at me, and head into my bedroom to dry off. Fuck shaving for today.

Heading over to my chest of drawers I pull out underwear and a clean t-shirt. As I turn I notice a small box on my pillow. Oh *fuck.* The rug is pulled from under me again, revealing once more the abyss gaping beneath – its large jaws waiting for me, longing for me – and my anger turns to fear.

It's something from her. What would she give me? I drop my clothes and, taking a deep breath, sit on the bed and pick up the box. It's a glider. A model-making kit for a Blanik L23. A scribbled note falls from the top of the box, wafting on to the bed.

This reminded me of a happy time.
Thank you.
Bella

Oh fuck… the perfect present from the perfect girl. Pain lances through me. Christ, it's indescribable. I double over, disemboweled. She's really fucking gone… leaving me this little glider. Why is this so painful? Why? Am I sick? I don't understand, why do I feel this way?

Some long-lost, distant ugly memory stirs and summons me, trying to sink its teeth into the here and now. No – that is not a place I want my mind to return to. I get up, tossing the box on the bed, and dress hurriedly. When I'm finished I grab the box and the note and head for my study. I will handle this better from the seat of fucking power.

My conversation with Jenks is brief. My conversation with the miserable lying bastard who married Lauren one drunken weekend in Vegas is briefer. His name is Bradley Walker. Their marriage survived eighteen months, but she left him three months ago. So where are you now, Lauren Elliott? What are you doing?

I try and concentrate on Lauren Elliott, nee Walker, trying to think of some clue from our past that might tell me where she is. Attempting suicide in my drawing room was one very loud message for me. I need to know where she is. I need to know she's safe. I need to know why. Why here? Why me? She wanted more and I didn't, but that was long ago. It was easy when she left – our arrangement was terminated by mutual consent. In fact the whole arrangement had been exemplary in terms of mutual consent… how it should be. She was mischievous when she was with me, deliberately so… not the broken creature Gail described. Why didn't that moronic psych see that? Involuntarily I recall how much she enjoyed our sessions in the playroom. She loved all that shit – she was a great submissive. An unsettling memory surfaces from our mutual past – me tying her big toes together, turning her feet in so she couldn't clench her backside and avoid the pain… yeah, she loved all that shit, and so did I. Yet in spite of this, in all our time together, she never captured my attention like Isabella Swan. She never drove me to distraction like Bella.

I gaze at the boxed glider kit on my desk. Absently my finger traces all the edges, knowing that Bella's fingers and hands have touched them. My sweet Isabella… what a contrast you are to all the women I've known. The only woman I've ever chased. The one woman who can't give me what I want. My brow creases… I just don't understand. I feel more for Bella than I've ever felt for anyone, yet I've known her for such a short time. I've come alive since I've known her, as if I've woken from a deep dark slumber. These last few weeks have been the most exciting, the most unpredictable, the most fascinating in my life. I feel like I've been reborn… enticed from my stark monochrome world to one emblazoned with rich color. She's under my skin like no one before – and yet she can't be what I need.

I put my head in my hands. She will never like what I do. I tried to kid myself that we could work up to the rougher shit, but it's not going to happen, ever. She's better off without me. What would she want with a fucked-up monster who can't bear to be touched?

And yet… and yet… she bought me this thoughtful gift. I gaze once more at the box. When was last time anyone who wasn't family did that? I open it. All the plastic parts of the craft stuck on one grid, shrouded in polythene… memories of her squealing in the glider during the wingover come to mind, her hands up, hitting the Perspex cockpit. I can't help my fond smile. Christ that was fun – the equivalent of pulling her pigtails in the

playground. Bella in pigtails… I shut down that thought immediately. I don't want to go there. Our first bath… And my remaining thought is that I won't see her again. And once more I feel like my life's blood has been sucked away, and I teeter on the edge of the abyss again.

I need to make this plane. It will give me something to focus on. Ripping open the polythene bag I quickly scan the build instructions. I need glue, modeling glue. I search quickly through my desk drawers. *Shit*... nestled at the back I find the red leather box holding the Cartier earrings I bought for her, for tonight. Fuck… I never got the chance to give them to her – and now I never will. The thought knocks a larger hole in my gut. Fuck.

I call Angela and leave a message on her cell asking her to cancel tonight. No way can I face the annual Chamber of Commerce Gala shindig, not without my date… my first date.

I open the red leather box and examine the earrings once more. They are beautiful. Simple yet elegant, just like the enchanting Miss Swan… who left me this morning because I punished her. Because I pushed too hard, and she let me. I put my head in my hands. She let me because she… I can barely think the word… she *loves* me. The thought is nauseating, and I dismiss it immediately. She can't. It's simple. No-one could feel like that about me. Not if they know me. Move on, Cullen, focus. Where's the fucking glue? I put the earrings back in my drawer and continue my search. Nothing. Why the fuck would you have modeling glue, Cullen?

I buzz Taylor.

"Mr Cullen?"

"I need some modeling glue."

"For what sort of model, sir?"

"A kid's model glider."

"Balsa wood or plastic?"

"Plastic."

"I have some. I'll bring it down now, sir."

"Thank you," I mutter, stunned that Taylor has modeling glue. What the hell for?

Moments later he knocks on the door.

"Come."

He strides into my study and places the small plastic pot on my desk. He doesn't leave. I glance up at him, and I have to ask.

"Why do you have this?"

"I build the odd plane." Taylor actually flushes.

"Oh?" In spite of my wretchedness my curiosity is piqued.

"Flying was my first love, sir."

I frown at him.

"Color blind," he adds, flatly.

I nod.

"So, it was the Marines?"

"Sir."

"Thank you for this."

"No problem, Mr Cullen. Have you eaten?"

His question takes me by surprise.

"I'm not hungry, Taylor. Please, go enjoy the afternoon with your daughter, and I'll see you tomorrow. I won't bother you again."

He hesitates. I gaze up at him, my blood heating with anger.

"I'm good." Shit, my voice is raw.

"Sir," he nods. "I'll return tomorrow evening."

I give him a quick dismissive nod, and he's gone. When was the last time Taylor offered me anything to eat? Shit… I must look more fucked-up than I thought. Sullenly I grab the pot of glue.

~o~

I place the glider in the palm of my hand, gazing at it fondly, memories of that flight nudging my consciousness. Isabella was impossible to wake – I smile as I recall – and once up she was… difficult, and beautiful, and funny, with her smart mouth. I smirk at her horror on finding the crap Lauren put on my iPod… Christ that was amusing… then her innocent girlish excitement during the flight, the squealing, and afterwards… our kiss. My first conscious outward expression of *more*. I snort. Apart, of course, from flying all the way to humid, sticky Florida in the first place… I just wanted to see her. It's extraordinary that over such a short time I have so many happy memories to explore – in sharp contrast to now. The yawning ache is still very much in place, nagging me, making me hyper-aware of what I've lost. Focus on the glider, Cullen. I have the transfers to stick in place now.

The transfers are fiddly little suckers, but finally the last one is on and drying. I glance up – the light is fading. Christ it's late. My initial thought is that I can show this to Bella… and reality comes crashing down around me. No more Bella. I clench my teeth as I stretch my stiff shoulders. I stand slowly and realize I have not eaten all day, or had anything to drink, and my head is throbbing. I feel like shit.

I check my Blackberry in the hope that she's called, but there's only a text from Angela.

CC Gala canx.
Hope all well.
A

Weirdly, while I'm reading Angela's message, the Blackberry buzzes. My heart rate immediately spikes, then falls. It's Irina.

"Hello," I mutter, not disguising my disappointment.

"Edward, is that any way to say hi? What's eating you?" she scolds, but her voice is full of humor.

I gaze out of the window. It's dusk over Seattle. I wonder briefly what Sweet Isabella is doing. I don't want to tell Irina my latest news… I don't want to say the words out loud and make them a reality.

"Edward? What gives? Tell me." Her tone shifts to brusque and annoyed.

"She left me," I mutter morosely after another too-long pause.

"Oh." Irina sounds surprised. "Want me to come over?"

"No."

She takes a deep breath.

"This life isn't for everyone."

"I know."

"Hell Edward, you sound like shit. Do you want to go out to dinner?"

"No."

"I'm coming over."

"No Irina. I'm not good company. I'm tired and I want to be alone. I'll call during the week."

"Edward… it's for the best."

"I know. Goodbye."

I hang up. I don't want to talk to her. She was the one who encouraged me to fly down to Florida. Perhaps she knew this day would come. I scowl at the phone, toss it on to my desk and go in search of something to drink and eat.

~o~

I gaze up at the bedroom ceiling. I cannot sleep. I am engulfed in her sweet fragrance that still clings to my bedsheets. I have pulled her pillow over my face to breathe in her lingering scent. It's torture, it's heaven… and for a moment I contemplate my death by suffocation. Dying with her scent filling my nostrils, filling my head, filling the empty raging hole in my gut… filling what's left of my shattered soul. Fuck off, Cullen.

I mentally rerun the morning's events, wondering if they could have played out differently. Normally I hate doing this, because it's such a waste of energy, but today… I'm just looking for clues as to where I went wrong. And no matter how I play it out in my head, I know in my bones we would have reached this impasse – whether it was this morning, or in a week, a month, or a year. It's better that it happened now before I could inflict any further damage on Isabella.

I think of her huddled in her little white bed. I can't picture her in the new apartment – I've not been there – but in her room in Vancouver where I slept with her once. I shake my head. The best fucking night's sleep I had in years. I've been sleeping well recently… another first. I glance at the radio alarm. It's one in the morning. I have lain here for three hours, my mind churning. I take a deep breath, her scent still evident, and I close my eyes…

He's come back. Mommy's asleep… or sick… I hide and curl up small under the table in the Kitchen. Through my fingers I can see Mommy. She is asleep on the couch. Her hand is on the sticky green rug and he's wearing his big boots with the shiny buckle and standing over Mommy shouting. He hits Mommy with a belt. *Get Up! Get Up! You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch. You are one fucked-up bitch.* Mommy makes a noise. *Stop*. Mommy doesn't scream. Mommy curls up small. I have my fingers in my ears and I close my eyes. The sound stops. He turns and I can see his boots as he stomps into the kitchen. He still has the belt. He is trying to find me. He stoops down and grins at me. He smells nasty. Of cigarettes and drink. *There you are you little shit.*

A chilling wail wakes me, and I'm drenched in sweat, my heart pounding. What the fuck? I sit bolt upright in bed. Fuck. They're back. The noise was me. I take a deep steadying breath, trying to rid my mind of the smell of cheap bourbon and stale Camel cigarettes.

I glance at the clock. It's three-thirty. I head into the kitchen and after sinking a large glass of water I sit down at the piano

I wake again with a jolt and it's light – bright early morning sunshine filling the room. Shit… I was dreaming of Bella. Bella kissing me, her tongue in my mouth, my fingers in her hair… pressing her delectable body against me… then her hands tethered above her head. Where is she? For one sweet moment I forget all that transpired yesterday… then it floods back to me. Fuck. She's gone. I groan as the evidence of my desire presses into the mattress… but the memory of her beautiful eyes, clouded with hurt and humiliation as she left, soon solves that problem.

I still feel like shit. I lie on my back and stare at the ceiling, arms behind my head.

The day stretches out before me and for the first time in… years – I don't know what to do with myself. I check the time… just after 6.00. I decide to go for a run.

Prokofiev's arrival of the Montagues and Capulets blares in my ears as I pound the sidewalk through the early morning quiet of 4th Avenue. I ache everywhere, my lungs are bursting, my head throbbing, and the yawning dull ache of loss eats away at my inside. Fuck it – I cannot run from this pain, though I am going to try. I stop to change the music. I want something… violent. Pump It, by the Black Eyed Peas, yeah… I pick up the pace.

Unconsciously I find myself running towards Pike Place Market… and I know it's insane, but I hope to see her. As I near her street my heart races harder and my anxiety increases. I am desperate to see her. I try and convince myself I just want to check she's okay. But that's not true. I want to see her. I turn into her street and pace past her apartment building. All is quiet – an Oldsmobile trundles down the road, two dog walkers are out – but there's no sign of any life from within her apartment. Crossing the street I

pause on the sidewalk opposite, catching my breath while I loiter in the doorway of an office building. The curtains of one room are closed. The others are open. Perhaps that's her room. Maybe she's still asleep – if she's there at all. A nightmare scenario forms in my mind… she went out last night, got drunk, met someone… Fuck. I feel nauseous. The thought of her beautiful body in someone else's hands, some fucker basking in the warmth of her smile, making her giggle, making her laugh… making her come. It takes all my self-control not to go barging through the front door of her apartment to check she's there and on her own.

You brought this on yourself, Cullen. Forget her. She's not for you. I tug my Mariners cap low over my face and head on down 1st Avenue.

So this is what jealousy feels like… it violently fills the gaping hole. I hate it – it stirs something deep in my psyche that I really don't want to examine. I run harder, away from that memory, away from the pain and away from Isabella Swan.

~o~

It's dusk over Seattle. I stand up and stretch. I've been at my desk all day, and it's been productive. I have checked through the due diligence papers, the business plan and the draft contract for Seattle Independent Publishing. I can shelve the other two – this is the one I want. I'll be able to keep an eye on her… The thought is painful and appealing in equal measure.

I've read and commented on two patent applications, four contracts and two design specs, and lost in the detail of those I have not thought about her… although the ache of loss remains. I glance at the little glider that's still on my desk, taunting me, reminding me of happier times… like she said. I picture her standing in the doorway to my office in one of my t-shirts, all long naked legs and big brown eyes, just before she went to Florida… when she seduced me in my office. Another first.

I miss her. There – I admit it. I check my Blackberry… nothing. No missed calls. The nagging pain in my gut expands, clawing at the boundaries of the raging empty hole in my insides. She won't call me. She wanted a clean break. She wanted to get away from me, and I can't blame her. It's for the best. Wearily I head to the kitchen for something to eat.

Gail is back. The kitchen has been cleaned and there's a pot on the stove. Smells good… but I'm not hungry. She walks in while I am eyeing what's in the pot.

"Good evening, sir."

"Gail."

She pauses, blinking at me – surprised by something. Shit, I must look bad.

"Chicken Chasseur?" she asks uncertainly, and I can see her scrutinizing my face in a way she doesn't normally.

"Sure," I mutter.

"For two?" she asks tentatively.

I glare at her, and she stills and blanches.

"For one."

"Ten minutes?" she says, her voice wavering.

"Fine."

I turn to leave.

"Mr Cullen…?"

She gazes at me and flushes under my stare.

"What, Gail?" Even to my own ears my voice is frigid.

"It's nothing. Sorry to disturb you." She heads to the pot on the stove to stir the contents and I stalk off to have another shower. Christ… even my fucking staff have noticed something's rotten in the state of fucking Denmark.

I dread going to bed. It's late, and I'm tired, but I play the Bach Marcello piece over and over again. Remembering yesterday morning, her head resting on my shoulder, I can almost smell her sweet unique Bella fragrance. I had woken early and couldn't get back to sleep, because I was worried about Lauren and angry that she'd absconded. But I was so full of hope for Bella and me. Our previous evening in the playroom had been… beyond all my expectations. Yes… the Tallis. My libido remembers it all too well. The blood in my body thickens and briefly obscures the aching hole in my gut. But I halt my arousal in its tracks. The memory of Bella's detached, bleak look when she left is enough to extinguish any sexual yearning.

For fuck's sake, she said she'd try! I stop playing and put my head in my hands, my elbows hammering out two discordant chords as I lean on the keys. She said she'd try, but she fell at the first hurdle. Then she ran. Why the fuck did I hit her so hard? But deep inside I know the answer – because she asked me, and I was too impetuous and selfish, and seduced by her challenge, to resist the temptation. She threw down the gauntlet and I seized the opportunity to move us on… move on to where I wanted us to be. And she didn't safe-word, and I hurt her more than she could take – when I promised her I'd never

do that. What a fucking fool I am. How could she ever trust me after that? It's right she's gone. Why the hell would she want to be with me?

I contemplate getting drunk. I have not been drunk since I was fifteen – well, once, when I was twenty-one. I fear the loss of control. I know what alcohol can do to a man… I shudder involuntarily as I snap my mind shut to those memories and decide to call it a night.

As I gaze up at the ceiling I pray for a dreamless sleep… but if I am to dream, I want to dream of her.

Mommy is pretty today. She sits down and lets me brush her hair. She looks at me in the mirror and she smiles her special smile. Her special smile for me. There is a loud noise. A crash. He's back. No! *Where the fuck are you, bitch? Got a friend in need here. A friend with cash.* Mommy stands and takes my hand and pushes me into her closet. No, Mommy. I don't like the dark. I sit on her shoes and try to be quiet and cover my ears and close my eyes tight shut. The clothes smell of Mommy. I like the smell. He is shouting. *Where is the little fucking runt?* He has my hair and he pulls me out of the closet. *Don't want you spoiling the party you little shit.* He slaps Mommy hard round her face. *Make it good for my friend and you get your fix bitch.* Mommy looks at me and she has tears. Don't cry Mommy. Another man comes into the room. A big man with dirty hair. The big man smiles at Mommy. I am pulled into the other room. He pushes me on to the floor and I hurt my knees. *Now what am I going to do with you, you piece of shit?* He smells nasty. He smells of beer and he is smoking a cigarette.

I wake. Fuck. Fuck. My heart is flying like I've run 40 blocks, chased by the hounds of hell. Fuck. I vault out of bed, pushing the vivid nightmare back into the dark recesses of my consciousness, and hurry to the kitchen to fetch a glass of water. I need to see Banner. This is fucking ridiculous. They're worse than ever.

As I stand by my kitchen sink I think, how odd that sleeping with her made the nightmares disappear. I slept well with Bella beside me. It never occurred to me to sleep with any of my subs… well, I certainly never felt the inclination. Was I worried that they might touch me in the night? I just don't know. It took an inebriated innocent to show me how restful it could be… I watched her sleep that night. She slept well. I'd watched my subs sleep before, but it was always as a prelude to waking them for some sexual relief. I remember gazing at Isabella for what felt like hours… and the more I gazed the more beautiful she became. Her smooth alabaster skin almost luminous in the soft light at the Heathman, her dark luxurious mane of hair fanning out on the crisp white pillow, and the way her long dark eyelashes fluttered while she slept… Her lips were slightly parted and I could see her small even front teeth, and her tongue when she licked her lips. It was one of the most arousing things I'd ever seen. And when I finally went to sleep, listening to her soft even breathing, watching her breasts rise and fall with each breath, I slept well… so well.

Feeling foolish I wander into my study and pick up the little glider. The sight of it elicits a reluctant smile from me. I feel both proud to have made it, and ridiculous for what I am about to do. It was her last gift to me. Her first gift being… what? Pain reverberates through my body. Of course – herself. She gave me herself. Fuck, will this pain ever just stop? I take the glider and head back to bed.

~o~

"What would you like for breakfast, sir?"

"Just coffee, Gail."

She pauses, then nods, though I can see her confounded expression as she turns away.

"Sir, you didn't eat your dinner."

I gaze at her impassively.

"And?"

She flushes.

"Maybe you're sickening for something."

"Not physically, Gail. Just coffee. Please." I shut her down – this is none of her fucking business. She purses her lips, but nods once more, and turns to the Gaggia. I head into the study to collect my papers for the office and find a padded envelope.

~o~

I call Kate from the car.

"I want SIP. The due diligence is fine, though I have some thoughts. And their business plan needs an overhaul. But let's offer."

"Edward, this is fast."

"I want to move quickly. They're ripe for a take-over – they have financial difficulties and they're using antiquated methods. We need to bring them into the twenty first century… and I want it. I've emailed you on the due diligence and the business plan. I'll be in the office from 7.30. Let's meet."

"If you're sure…"

"I'm sure."

"Okay. I'll call Angela re your schedule this morning. I also have the stats on the Detroit v Florida options for the new plant."

"Summary."

"Detroit."

"I see." Shit… not Florida. "And Darfur?"

"In hand."

"Good. Let's talk later." I hang up.

I sit brooding in the back of the Mercedes as Taylor glides through the traffic. I wonder how sweet Isabella will be getting to work this morning. Perhaps she bought a car yesterday, though somehow I doubt it. I wonder if she feels as miserable as I do… I hope not. I hope she's over her ridiculous fixation. But even as the idea that she loves me pops into my head my body rebels with a swift kick to my gut. She can't love me. How could she love someone like me? And certainly not now – not after all I've done to her. No one's said it to me before… except Mom and Dad. But that was surely their sense of duty. Banner's nagging words about unconditional parental love – even for kids that are adopted – ring in my head.

"Mr Cullen?"

"Sorry… what is it, Taylor?" Taylor has caught me unawares. He's standing by the car door, holding it open. I gaze at him, and he looks at me expectantly but with concern.

"We're here, sir."

We're outside the office building. Shit… how long have we been here?

"Thanks. I'll let you know what time this evening." Fuck, I need to focus.

~o~

Angela and Jessica both glance anxiously up as I stride out of the elevator. Jessica flutters her eyelashes and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. Christ – do I have to tolerate this silly girl mooning at me today? I feel my eyes narrow. I need HR to move her to another department.

"Coffee now, Jessica – and get me a croissant or something," I snap at her. She looks suitably crestfallen as she leaps up to follow my orders.

"Angela – get me Jenks, then Banner, then Laurent Bastille on the phone. I don't want to be disturbed at all, not even by my mother… unless… unless Isabella Swan calls. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. Do you want to go through your schedule now?"

"No. I need coffee and something to eat first." I scowl at Jessica who is retreating into the elevator.

"Yes Mr Cullen," Angela replies. I ignore Jessica's panicked look to Angela and head into my office.

From my briefcase I take the padded envelope that holds my most precious possession – the glider. Placing it on my desk I gaze at it, feeling once more the distracting emptiness. She'll be starting her new job this morning… meeting new people. New men. The thought is depressing. She'll forget me. Surely she won't forget me. Women always remember the first man they've fucked… I'll always have a place in her memory, for that alone. I want to stay in her mind. I need to stay in her mind. I don't want her to forget me… What can I do? There's a knock at the door.

"Yes," I snap, dragged away from my sickening reverie of Miss Swan with other men. Angela opens the door.

"Coffee and croissants for you, Mr Cullen."

"Come in."

As she scuttles over to my desk I can see her eyes dart to the glider, but wisely she holds her tongue. She places the coffee and a plate with two croissants on my desk.

"Thanks."

"I've left a message for Jenks and Laurent. Banner is calling back in five."

"Good. Bring my schedule in. I want you to cancel any social engagements I have this week. No lunches, nothing in the evening. Get Barney on the phone, and find me the number of a good florist."

She scribbles furiously on her notepad.

"Sir? We use Arcadia's Roses. Would you like me to send flowers for you?"

"No, I'll do it myself. That's all."

She nods and leaves promptly, as if she can't get out of my office quick enough. A few moments later the phone buzzes… it's Barney.

"Barney, I need you to make me a glass stand for a model glider."

~o~

Between meetings I call the florist and order two dozen white roses for Bella, to be delivered to her home in the evening. That way she won't be embarrassed or inconvenienced at work. And that way she won't be able to forget me…

"Would you like a message with the flowers, sir?" the florist asks, confounding me.

Shit… a message to Bella. What to say? Come back. I'm sorry. I won't hit you again. The words pop unbidden into my head, making me frown.

"Um… something like, 'Congratulations on your first day at work. I hope it went well." I gaze at the glider on my desk. "And thank you for the glider – that was very thoughtful. It has pride of place on my desk. Edward.'"

The florist reads it back to me. Shit, it doesn't express what I want to say to her at all.

"Will that be all, Mr Cullen?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"You're welcome, sir and have a nice day."

I scowl at the phone. Nice day my ass.

~o~

"Hey man, what's eating you?" Laurent gets up from the floor where I've just knocked him flat on his lean mean rear end. "You're on fire this afternoon, Cullen." He rises slowly, with the grace of a sleek jungle cat reassessing his prey. We are sparring alone in the gym in the basement of my building.

"I'm feeling pissed," I hiss.

He gazes at me coolly as we circle each other.

"Not a good idea to enter the ring if your thoughts are elsewhere," Laurent mutters cautiously, not taking his eyes off me.

I snort.

"I'm finding it helps," I say cockily.

"More on your left. Protect your right. Hand up, Cullen."

He swings and hits me on my shoulder, almost knocking me off balance.

"Concentrate, Cullen. None of your boardroom bullshit here. Or is it a woman? Some sweet skirt finally cramping your cool," he sneers, goading me. It works. I kick him full up on his side and drop punch once, then twice, and he staggers back.

"Mind your own fucking business, Bastille."

"Whoa, we have found the source of the pain," Laurent beams triumphantly. He swings suddenly, but I anticipate his action and block him, thrusting up with a punch and a swift kick.

He jumps back this time, impressed.

"Whatever shit's happening in your small world, Cullen, it's working. Bring it on."

Oh, he is going down. I lunge at him.

~o~

The traffic is light on the way home.

"Taylor, can we make a detour?"

"Where to, sir?"

"Can you drive past Miss Swan's apartment?"

"Yes, sir." There's only a moment's hesitation in his voice.

I've got used to this ache. It seems to be ever-present, like tinnitus or something. When I'm in meetings it's muted and less obtrusive. It's only now, left alone with my thoughts, that it flares and rages in my gut. Fuck. How long does this last? I have never felt like this. As we get nearer to her apartment my heartbeat spikes, filling the void. Perhaps I'll see her. The thought is thrilling and unsettling, disturbingly so. And I realize that I have

thought of nothing but her since she left. Her absence is with me, like white noise, constantly in the background, accompanying the pain.

"Drive slow," I mutter to Taylor as we near her apartment. The lights are on. She's home! I hope she's alone… and missing me. I wonder if she's received my flowers. I want to check my Blackberry to see if she's sent me a message, but I can't drag my attention away from the windows of her apartment, just in case I see her. Is she well? Is she thinking about me? Is she thinking about someone else? I wonder how her work went…

"Again, sir?" Taylor asks as we glide on past and the apartment disappears from view.

"No." I exhale and take a deep breath. I hadn't realized I'd stopped breathing, and I cannot understand the crushing disappointment I feel at not seeing her. As we head back to Escala I glance through my emails and texts, hoping for something from her… but there's nothing. *A clean break*, I think bleakly.

~o~

Jenks has nothing. How is Lauren able to disappear like this? No paper or electronic trail… it's frustrating. I just hope she's safe. Taking a sip of my cognac I wander listlessly into my library. It's quiet in the apartment… I'd not really noticed before. Sweet Isabella's absence has accentuated the silence. I never showed her this room. I expect to find some solace here, since it holds no memories of her. I contemplate putting on some music, but I just can't bear to listen to anything at the moment, except perhaps my piano.

I survey all my books. It's ironic that she's never seen this room. I'm sure she'd like it, given her literary background. Does she play billiards? I imagine not. An image of her spread-eagled over the green baize springs involuntarily to my mind. I take another swig of cognac and head out of the room. While there may not be any memories in here, my mind is more than capable and more than willing to create vivid, erotic images of the lovely Isabella. I can't bear it.

We're fucking. Fucking hard. Against the bathroom door. She's mine. I bury myself in her, again and again. Glorying in her… her smell, the feel of her, her taste. Fisting my hand in her hair, holding her in place. Holding her ass. Her legs wrapped around my waist. She cannot move, she's pinioned by me, ensnared by me… Wrapped around me like silk. Her hands pulling my hair. Oh yes. I'm home, she's home. This is the place I want to be… inside her… She. Is. Mine. I can feel her muscles tightening as she comes, clenching around me, her head back. Come for me! She cries out and I follow… oh yes my sweet, sweet Isabella. She looks sleepy, sated – and oh so sexy. She stands and gazes at me, a playful smile on her lips, then pushes me away and walks backwards, saying nothing. I grab her and we're in the playroom. I'm holding her down over the bench. I raise my arm to punish her, belt in hand… and she disappears. She's by the door. Her face white,

shocked and sad, and she's silently drifting back… the door has disappeared, and she won't stop. She holds out her hands to me… *Join me*, she whispers, but she's moving backwards, getting fainter… disappearing before my eyes… vanishing… she's gone. *No,* I shout. *No!* But my voice is silent. I'm mute… again.

I wake, disorientated. Fuck… shit. A fucking dream… Fuck – I am a sticky fucking mess. Shit. Briefly I feel that long-forgotten but familiar sense of fear and exhilaration – but Irina doesn't own me now, thank fuck. Christ… this hasn't happened to me since I was, what? Fifteen, sixteen? Fuck. I lie back in the darkness, disgusted with myself. Jesus H. Christ. I drag my t-shirt off and wipe myself down. It's like I've come for America here, spunk everywhere. I find myself smirking in the darkness, in spite of the dull ache of loss. The erotic dream was worth it. The rest of it… fucking hell. I turn over and go back to sleep.

He has gone. Mommy is sitting on the couch. She is quiet. She looks at the wall and blinks sometimes. I stand in front of her but she waves me away. He hurts Mommy. He hurts me. I hate him. He makes me so mad. It's best when it's just Mommy and me. She is mine then. My Mommy. My tummy hurts. It is hungry again. I am in the kitchen looking for cookies. I pull the chair to the cupboard and climb up. I find some crackers. It is the only thing in the cupboard. I sit down on the chair and open the box. There are two left. I eat them. They taste good. I hear him. He's back. I climb down and I run to my bedroom and climb into bed. I pretend to be asleep. He pokes me with his finger. *Stay here you little shit. I want to fuck your bitch of a mother. I don't want to see your fuck ugly face for the rest of the evening. Understand?* He slaps my face when I don't reply. *Or you get the burn, you little prick.* No. I don't like that. I don't like the burn. It hurts. *Got it, retard?* I know he wants me to cry. But it's hard. I can't make the noise. He hits me with his fist…

Startled awake again I lie panting in the pale dawn light waiting for my heart rate to slow, trying to lose the nauseating acrid metallic taste of fear from my mouth.

She saved you from this shit, Cullen. You didn't have to revisit those dark gruesome memories when she was with you. Why did you let her leave? I note with irony that I am not sweating or screaming. I have become more tolerant of my nightmares. I glance at the clock. 5:15… Think I'll go for a run.

Her building is in gloomy shadows. The early morning sun has not touched and woken it yet. It's fitting, reflecting my mood, and I hope to God that she's sleeping up there… alone. Her apartment is in darkness and the curtains to the same room are drawn. That must be her room. I can envisage her curled up on her white iron bed, a small ball of Bella. Is she dreaming of me? Or do I give her nightmares? Or has she forgotten me… her clean break a success? Pain yawns and stretches, awakening in my gut and in my chest. Fuck… how long will I feel like this? I've never felt so… fucking miserable. Felt despair eating my soul… well, not for a long time. My thoughts spiral back to before I was a Cullen… No, no – not awake too – this is too hard to bear. I pull my hood up over

my head and lean against the granite wall, hidden in the doorway of the office building. My usual spot, I think ironically, dragging my head back to the now, and the awful thought crosses my mind that I may be standing here in a week, a month… a year? Watching, waiting, just to catch a glimpse of the girl who used to be mine. It's painful… I've become what she's always accused me of being – her stalker.

I can't go on like this. I have to see her. See that's she's okay. Just try and erase the last image I have of her, defeated, humiliated, wounded… and leaving me. I have to think of a way.

~o~

Back at Escala, Gail watches me impassively.

"I didn't ask for this," I mutter, gazing at the omelette she's prepared for me.

"I'll throw it away then, Mr Cullen," she says quietly and reaches for the plate.

I give her a hard stare. She knows I hate waste.

"You did this on purpose."

"Yes sir."

Interfering fucking woman.

"I'll eat it. Thank you." My voice is arctic.

And she fucking smiles, a small victorious smile. I scowl at her, but she's unfazed, and with the memory of last night's nightmare lingering at the edge of my consciousness I gratefully devour my breakfast.

~o~

Could I just call her and say hi? Would she take my call? I gaze at the glider on my desk… her thoughtful gift. She wanted a clean break. I should honour that, and leave her alone. But I want to hear her voice. For a moment I contemplate calling her and hanging up, just to hear her speak, just to hear her soothing soft voice.

"Edward, are you okay?"

"Sorry Kate, what was that?"

"You're so distracted. I've never seen you like this."

"I'm fine," I snap. Shit – concentrate, Cullen. "What were you saying?"

I can see Kate eyeing me suspiciously but she gives me the benefit of the doubt.

"I was saying that SIP is in more financial difficulty than we originally thought. Are you sure you want to go ahead?"

"Yes." My voice is vehement. "I do."

"Their team will be here this afternoon to sign the heads of agreement."

"Good. Now what's the latest on the air drop to Darfur?"

~o~

I stand brooding, staring down through the slatted wooden blinds at Taylor parked outside Banner's office. It's late afternoon and I'm thinking about her.

"Edward, I'm more than happy to take your money and watch you stare out the window, but I don't think that view is the reason you're here," Banner says dryly.

When I turn to face him he's gazing at me with an air of polite anticipation. I sigh heavily and make my way to his couch.

"The nightmares are back. Like never before."

Banner lifts a brow.

"The same ones?"

"Yes."

"What's changed?"

I look at him quizzically and he shakes his head slightly.

"Edward, you look as miserable as sin and you're normally more verbose… something's happened."

Okay. Here goes… the Dr John Banner headfuck. Again I feel like I did with Irina… part of me doesn't want to tell him, because then it's real.

"I met a girl."

He frowns.

"And…"

"She left me."

He looks surprised.

"Women have left you before. Why is this different?"

I stare at him blankly. Why is Bella different? Bella. Different. My thoughts blur together in a rapid jumbled list. She's not a submissive. We had no contract. She was sexually inexperienced, a complete innocent. She's the first woman I wanted more from than just sex. Christ – all the firsts I experienced with her: the first girl I'd slept with, the first virgin, the first to meet my family, the first to fly in Echo Charlie, the first I took soaring. She would have been my first date to the Chamber of Commerce Gala, too… the first time I'd ever publicly taken a girl to an event. Fuck. Yeah… Different.

"It's a simple question, Edward." Banner interrupts my thoughts.

"I miss her."

His face remains kind and concerned, but he gives nothing away.

"You've never missed any of the women you were involved with previously?"

"No."

"So she's different *because* you miss her…?"

"No. I miss her, because things between us were different."

"How so?"

I shrug, but he persists.

"Did you have a contractual relationship with her? Was she a submissive?"

After a beat I answer.

"I'd hoped she would be. But it's not for her."

"I don't understand." Banner frowns slightly.

"I broke one of my rules. I chased this girl, thinking that she'd be interested, and it turned out it wasn't for her."

"Tell me what happened."

And it's like he's opened the flood gates. I recount the past month's events, from the moment Bella fell into my office to when she left on Saturday morning…

"I see. You've certainly packed a lot in since we last spoke."

He rubs his chin as he gazes at me.

"There are many issues here, Edward. But right now the one I want to focus on is how you felt when she said she loved you."

I inhale sharply as my gut tightens in disgust.

"Nauseous," I mutter.

"And how do you feel now?"

Fuck… Lost. I feel lost.

"I miss her. I want to see her." I feel like I'm in a confessional owning up to a dark, dark need that I have, as if she's an addiction. I should let her go.

"So in spite of the fact that, as you perceive it, she couldn't fulfil your needs, you miss her?"

"Yes. It's not just my perception, John. She can't be what I want her to be, and I can't be what she wants me to be."

"Are you sure?"

"She walked out."

"She walked out because you belted her. If she doesn't share your tastes, can you blame her?"

"No."

"Have you thought about trying a relationship her way?"

I stare at him, blankly. He continues.

“Did you find sexual relations with her satisfying?”

Not the sex-talk again! Fuck.

“Yes, of course,” I snap at him. He ignores my tone.

“Did you find beating her satisfying?”

“Very.”

“Would you like to do it again?”

Again? Do that to her again! And watch her walk out… again?

“No.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because it’s not her scene. I hurt her. Really hurt her… and she can’t… she won’t…” I pause. “She doesn’t enjoy it.” I don’t ever want to gaze into her wounded dark eyes again, knowing that I was the cause. Her expression will haunt me forever.

“And this resonates with you. How she feels.”

I gaze at him perplexed.

“Don’t you recognize yourself at all? Your past?”

Banner’s question knocks me off balance. Fuck, we’ve been over and over this.

“No I don’t. It’s different. The relationship I had with Mrs Lincoln was completely different.”

“I wasn’t referring to Mrs Lincoln.”

“What were you referring to?” My voice is deadly quiet, because suddenly I know where he’s going with this.

“You know.”

I gulp for air, feeling once more the impotence of a defenceless child… the rage. The deep infuriating rage…

“It’s not the same,” I whisper, barely holding on to my temper.

"No, it's not," Banner concedes.

But the image of her indignant rage comes unwelcome to my mind. *'This is what you really like? Me, like this?'* It dampens my anger immediately.

"She was mad," I whisper. "I've never seen her so angry."

"And why do you think that was?"

"Because I hurt her."

"She says she loves you. And you hurt her. As you've said, it's not her scene."

"I know what you're trying to do here, Doctor, but it's a very unfair comparison. She's a consenting adult, for fuck's sake and she had the ability to leave!"

"I know. I'm just callously illustrating a point, Edward. You are a very angry man, and you have every reason to be. I'm not going to rehash all this right now – you're obviously suffering, and the whole point of these sessions is to move you to a place where you are more accepting and comfortable with yourself." He pauses. "This girl…"

"Isabella," I mutter petulantly.

"Isabella. She's obviously had a profound effect on you. Her leaving has re-awoken your PTSD, all your abandonment issues. She clearly means much more to you than you're willing to admit to yourself."

And it's like he's punched me in the gut. Is that why this is so painful? She means more, so much more, than I'm willing to admit to myself? The thought is revelatory. Shit… of course.

"You need to focus on where you want to be," Banner continues. "And it sounds to me like you want to be with this girl. You miss her. That's been the overriding tenet of your conversation here today. Do you want to be with her?"

I blink at him.

"Yes," I whisper.

"Then you have to focus on that goal. This goes back to what I've been banging on about for our last few sessions – the SFBT. If she's in love with you, as she told you she is, she must be suffering too. So I repeat my question: have you considered a more conventional relationship with this girl?"

"No, I haven't."

"Why not?"

"Because it's never occurred to me that I could."

"Well if she's not prepared to be your submissive, you can't play the role of dominant."

I gaze at him, shocked. It's not a role – it's who I am. And from nowhere, I recall an earlier email to Isabella… my words. *What I think you fail to realize is that in Dom/sub relationships it is the sub who has all the power. That's you. I'll repeat this – you are the one with all the power. Not I.* If she doesn't want to do this… then neither can I. *Fuck.* Hope stirs unexpectedly in my chest. Could I? Could I have a vanilla relationship with Isabella? Could I turn my back on all that I know? Fuck… possibly. If I could… would she want me back?

"Edward, you have demonstrated over and over again that you are an extraordinarily capable person, in spite of your problems. You're a very rare individual. Once you focus on a goal, you drive ahead and achieve it – usually surpassing all your own expectations. Listening to you today it's clear you were focused on getting Isabella to where you wanted her to be, but you didn't take into account her inexperience or her feelings. It seems to me that you've been so focused on reaching your destination that you missed the journey that you were both taking together. Do you agree? Think about it for a moment." He stops and gazes at me.

The last month flashes before me… her tripping clumsily into my office, her acute embarrassment at Newton's, her witty, snarky emails, her smart mouth… her giggle… her quiet fortitude and defiance, her courage – and in a flash it occurs to me that I have enjoyed every fucking minute. Every infuriating, distracting, humorous, sensual, carnal second of her – yes, I have. We've been on an extraordinary journey, both of us – well, I certainly have – a jaded roué and an innocent novice.

My thoughts take a darker turn. I am not worthy of her. She doesn't know the depths of my depravity, the darkness of my soul – maybe I should leave her alone. But even as I think the words I know that I just don't have the strength to stay away from her… if she'll have me.

"Edward." Banner calls me back.

"Think about it. Our time is up now. I want to see you in few days and talk through some of the other issues you mentioned. I'll have Janet call Angela and arrange a time." He stands and I know it's time to leave.

"You've given me a lot to think about," I mutter.

"I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't. Just a few days, Edward. We have a great deal to cover." He shakes my hand reassuringly and I leave with a small blossom of hope.

~o~

I stand on the balcony surveying nocturnal Seattle. I am at one remove up here, away from it all, and normally I find that peaceful…. but lately my peace of mind has been shattered. All my carefully controlled emotions and feelings have been scattered to the winds since I met a certain dark eyed innocent. The lovely Isabella Swan. *"Have you thought about trying a relationship her way?"* Banner's words haunt me, opening up so many possibilities. Could I win her back? Christ… the thought terrifies me. I take a sip of cognac. Why would she want me back? Could I ever be what she wants me to be? I won't let the small burning ember of hope die. I need to find a way. I need her back. Something startles me, a movement, a shadow at the periphery of my vision. I frown. What the…? I head towards where I thought the movement was, but find nothing. Christ, I'm seeing things now. I slug the cognac and head back into the drawing room.

Mommy! Mommy! Mommy is asleep on the floor. She has been asleep for a long time. I shake her. She doesn't wake up. My tummy hurts. It is hungry. He isn't here. I am thirsty. In the kitchen I pull a chair to the sink and I have a drink. The water splashes over my dirty sweater. Mommy is still asleep. Mommy wake up! She lies still. She is cold. I fetch my blanky and I cover Mommy and I lie down on the sticky green rug beside her. Mommy is still asleep. I have two toy cars. They race by the floor where Mommy is sleeping. I think Mommy is sick. I search for something to eat. In the icebox I find peas. They are cold. I eat them slowly. They make my tummy hurt. I sleep beside Mommy. The peas are gone. In the icebox is something. It smells funny. I lick it and my tongue is stuck to it. I eat it slowly. It tastes nasty. I drink some water. I play with my cars and I sleep beside Mommy. Mommy is so cold and she won't wake up. The door crashes open. I cover Mommy with my blanky. *Fuck. What the fuck happened here? Oh the crazy fucked up bitch. Shit. Fuck. Get out of my way you little shit.* He kicks me and I hit my head on the floor. My head hurts. He calls somebody and he goes. He locks the door. I lay down beside Mommy. My head hurts. The lady policeman is here. No. No. No. Don't touch me. Don't touch me. Don't touch me. I stay by Mommy. No. Stay away from me. The lady policeman has my blanky and she grabs me. I scream. Mommy. Mommy. The words are gone. I can't say the words. Mommy can't hear me. I have no words.

I wake breathing hard, taking huge gulps of air, checking my surroundings. Oh thank Christ – I am in my bed. Slowly the fear recedes and I recover my equilibrium. I am twenty-seven, not four. This shit has to stop. I had these under control. Maybe one nightmare once every couple of weeks, but nothing like this, night after night. I turn over. Fuck. I want these dreams to stop. I want Isabella. I need her back here. Not just for the nightmares – I need her in my life. In my bed. She's the day to my night… I was her first. She's mine. I am going to fucking get her back.

My heart rate restored I lie back and think… how can I win her back? *Have you thought about trying a relationship her way?"* She wants hearts and flowers. How do I that? Can I give her that? I frown, staring up at the ceiling desperately recalling any romantic moments in my life… and I draw a complete blank. Nothing. Fuck… this is going to be hard, but not impossible, surely. I drift back to sleep, the mantra in my head: *She's mine. She's mine…* and I can smell her scent, feel her soft skin, taste her sweet lips, hear her soft moans. I groan at the thought and fall, into an erotic, Isabella-filled dream.

I wake suddenly, unnerved by something. My scalp prickles. I sit up and rub my head, glancing round the room. I note with irony that in spite of the carnal dreams of the lovely Miss Swan my body has conformed. Irina would be pleased… I smirk in the darkness. I remember that she called the previous night, and I haven't returned her call. Irina's the last person I want to talk to… there's only one place I want to be right now. I get up and pull on my running gear. I am going to check on Isabella.

The early morning dawn is cool and calm. The streets are quiet except for the rumble of the odd delivery truck, and one solitary dog walker. Her apartment is in darkness, the curtains to her room closed. I keep a silent vigil from my stalker's hide, gazing longingly up at the windows. I need a plan – a plan to capture a Swan. I turn my iPod up loud and Moby accompanies me on my run back to Escala.

"I'll have a croissant, Mrs C."

She gapes at me and I cock my head to one side. She flushes.

"Apricot preserve?" she asks, recovering herself.

I nod.

"I'll heat up a couple for you, Mr Cullen. Here's your coffee."

"Thank you, Gail."

She smiles, and I wonder why. Is it just because I am having croissants? Christ, if it makes her that happy I should have them more often. I stride into my office to escape.

In the back of the Merc, I plot. I need to get up close and personal with Miss Swan, begin my campaign to win her back. The question is, how? I call Angela and leave a message on her voicemail. She's not yet in the office, but then it's only 7.15.

"Angela, as soon as you're in, I want to run through my schedule for the next few days." There – step one in my offensive is to find out what the fuck I am supposed to be doing over the next few days. I don't have a clue. Normally I'm on this shit… Christ, I've

been all over the fucking place. Well, now I have a mission. Something to focus on. Yeah, Cullen, you can do this. You can get her back.

But deep down I wish I had the courage of my convictions. Anxiety unfurls in the depths of my gut. This has to work. She's my only hope.

"Mr Cullen, I cancelled all your social events this week. The only one I didn't was for tomorrow – I don't know what the occasion is. Your calendar says Portland, that's it."

I gape at her. CHRIST, YES! The fucking photographer! I think I beam at Angela, because her eyebrows shoot up in shock.

"Thanks, Angela. That's all for now. Send in Sam."

"Sure, Mr Cullen. Would you like some more coffee?"

"Please."

She nods politely and leaves. It's my in… Yes! Next… my plan of attack.

My morning has been back-to-back meetings. I have had to concentrate. My staff have been glancing at me nervously, waiting for me to explode. Okay, that has been my modus operandi for the last few days, but today I feel clearer, calmer, present and able to deal with all this shit. I have some bridges to mend. It's lunchtime and my workout with Laurent has gone well. We worked with weights today. I am famished, and when finally presented with my lunch am annoyed that there's no mayo on my sandwich. Jessica is making some grovelling apology. She practically shakes whenever she's near me… I must get that fucking girl out of my company.

"I said chicken *with* mayonnaise, Jessica. It's not hard."

"I'm sorry, Mr Cullen."

"Just go."

She blinks at me and I can see tears welling in her eyes. For fuck's sake, grow a backbone!

"Out!" I snap at her and she scrambles to leave the room.

I buzz Angela.

"Sir?"

"Come in here."

Angela appears at the doorway, wide-eyed and nervous.

"Get rid of that girl."

Angela pulls herself up straight.

"Sir, Jessica is Senator Blandino's daughter."

"I don't give a damn if she's the Queen of fucking England. Get her out of my office."

"Yes, sir." Angela flushes.

"Get someone else to help you," I mutter, my tone softer. I don't want to lose Angela.

"Yes, Mr Cullen."

"Thank you. That's all."

She nods, and I know she's back on board. She's a good PA. I don't want her to jack in her job because I'm being an asshole. She exits leaving me to my chicken sandwich, no mayo, and my plan of campaign. Portland.

I know the form of email address for employees at SIP. I think she'll respond better in writing. She always has. I compose an email to her… delete it and start again. Half an hour later I am still staring at a blank computer screen. What the fuck do I say? *Come back… please? Forgive me. I miss you. I can't sleep without you*. I put my head in my hands. Why is this so fucking difficult? Keep it simple, Cullen. Just cut the crap. I tap out an email. Yes… this will do.

Angela buzzes me.

"Kate's here to see you, sir."

"Tell her to wait."

I hang up.

I take a deep breath and press send.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:05
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Isabella

Forgive this intrusion at work. I hope that it's going well. Did you get my flowers?
I note that tomorrow is the gallery opening for your friend's show, and I'm sure you've not had time to purchase a car.
I would be more than happy to take you – should you wish.
Let me know.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

Fuck. My heart is practically in my fucking mouth. The anxiety explodes inside me, and to distract myself I trace my finger along the wings of my glider. For fuck's sake, Cullen, focus. Get a grip. Come on, Isabella… answer me. She's always been so prompt. I check my watch… 14:08. Nothing. Getting up I pace around my office, glancing at my watch every three seconds, or so it feels. By 14:20 I am in despair. She's not going to reply. She really does hate me. Shit… who could blame her? My hopes come crashing down around me.

I hear the ping of an email. My heart leaps into my throat and I look… Fuck! It's from Kate. She's gone back to her office… And then it's there, in my in box, the magical words: *From Isabella Swan.*

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:25
To: Edward Cullen

Hi Edward
Thank you for the flowers, they are lovely.
Yes, I would appreciate a lift.
Thank you

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

Relief floods through me and I close my eyes, savoring the feeling. YES! I pore over her email looking for clues… and as usual I have no idea what the thoughts are behind her words. The email is friendly enough, but that's it… Just friendly. I have to seize the fucking day. I respond.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tomorrow

Date: 10 June 2009: 14:27
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Isabella
What time shall I collect you?

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

She comes right back at me.

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:32
To: Edward Cullen

Jake's show starts at 7.30.
What time would you suggest?

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

Shit. I'll need Echo Charlie. I wonder if she's available, or if one of my execs is using her. If so, I'm pulling rank.

From: Edward Cullen
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:34
To: Isabella Swan

Dear Isabella
Portland is some distance away.
I shall collect you at 5.45.
I look forward to seeing you.

Edward Cullen
CEO, Cullen Enterprises Holdings Inc

From: Isabella Swan
Subject: Tomorrow
Date: 10 June 2009: 14:38
To: Edward Cullen

See you then.

Isabella Swan
Assistant to James Smith, Commissioning Editor, SIP

And that's it. Stage one complete. My campaign to capture a Swan is underway. I feel elated. The small blossom of hope is now a Japanese Flowering Cherry filling the aching gap in my chest. Yes. I can do this. I can get her back. Now to put stage two into operation… I buzz Angela.

"Miss Massey went back to her office, Mr Cullen."

"I know, she emailed me. I need Taylor here in an hour."

"Yes, sir."

I hang up. Now, Miss Swan is working for one James Smith. I need to know more about him… I call Kate.

"Edward." She sounds pissed. Tough.

"Do we have access to the employee files from SIP?"

"Not yet. But I can get them."

"Do. Today. I want everything they have on James Smith and whoever's worked for him."

"Can I ask why?"

"No."

She's silent for a moment.

"Edward, I don't know what's got into you recently."

"Kate, just do it, okay?"

She sighs,

"Okay. Now can we have our meeting about the technology division?"

"Yes. I had an important call to make. It took longer than I thought."

"I'll be right up."

~o~

When Kate leaves I follow her out of the office.

“WSU next Friday.” I look to Angela who scribbles down this nugget of information.

“And I get to fly in the company chopper?” Kate grins at me.

“Helicopter.” I correct her.

“Whatever, Edward.” She rolls her eyes as she enters the elevator and it makes me smile.

Angela is gazing at me expectantly. There’s no sign of Jessica. Good.

“WSU next Friday. We’ll fly down. Echo Charlie, not the jet. And call Stephan – I’m flying to Portland tomorrow evening.”

“Yes, Mr Cullen.”

“Has she gone?”

“Jessica? Yes.”

“Where to?’

“Finance.”

“Good thinking. It’ll keep Senator Blandino off my back.”

I am blessed with a rare Angela smile.

“You’re getting someone else to help out here?”

“Yes, sir. I’m seeing three candidates tomorrow morning.”

“Good. Is Taylor here?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Cancel the rest of my meetings today. I’m going out.”

She blinks at me.

“Out?” she squeaks.

“Yes,” I grin. “Out.”

~o~

"Where to, sir?"

"The Mac store."

"On NE 45th?"

"Yes."

I call Irina and leave a message on her voicemail, saying that I have returned her call. Leaning back into the seat I close my eyes and contemplate what I am going to put on the iPod I intend to buy Bella. So many songs I could choose… *'Toxic'*? I smirk at the thought. No, I don't think that would be a popular choice. She'd be mad as hell – and for the first time the thought of her mad makes me smile. Like she was in Florida, not like Saturday… I shift uncomfortably. I don't want to be reminded of that. I turn my mind back to potential song choices, feeling more buoyant than I have in days.

I have made a play-list for sweet Isabella. It's been a diverting evening, filled with music – a nostalgic journey through my iTunes. I remember her dancing round my kitchen, and I wish I knew what she had been listening to. She looked totally ridiculous and utterly adorable after… after I fucked her the first time. I frown. After I made love to her the first time? Neither term feels right. I recall her impassioned plea the night I introduced her to my parents. *'I want you to make love to me.'* How shocked I was by her simple statement – and yet all she wanted was to touch me. I shudder at the thought. I have to make her understand that this is a hard limit for me – I cannot tolerate being touched.

I shake my head. You're getting way ahead of yourself, Cullen. You have to close this deal first. I glance at the inscription on the iPod.

Isabella this is for you
I know what you want to hear
This music says it for me
Edward

Perhaps this will do it. She wants hearts and flowers. Perhaps this comes close. But I shake my head at the thought, because I have no idea. There's so much I want to say to her, if she'll listen. The songs say it for me. I just hope she gives me the opportunity to offer them to her. But if she doesn't like my proposal, if she doesn't like the thought of being with me – what will I do? To her I may just be a free ride to Portland. The thought depresses me and dampens my spirits as I head towards my bedroom for some much-needed sleep. Do I dare to hope? Yes I do.

The Doctor holds up his hands. *I'm not going to hurt you. I need to check your tummy, Edward. Here.* He gives me a cold round thing and he lets me play with it. *You put it on your tummy, and I won't touch you and I can hear your tummy*. The doctor is good… the Doctor is Daddy.

I wake, and for the millionth time relive my Dad's tender ministrations. They are etched vividly on my brain, though I have no idea if my memories are real or conjured from my imagination and dreams. Carlisle's calm voice, his gentle touch, his compassionate brown eyes… my lifesaver… my father. I have hero-worshipped him since I was four years old, and I am thankful once more that it was into his care I landed. Turning over I try to sleep some more.

My new Mommy is pretty. She is like an angel. She strokes my hair. I like it when she strokes my hair. She lets me eat ice cream and cake. There is another boy. Emmett. He is mean. But I punch him. My new Mommy doesn't like the fighting. Baby Alice. She is so small. She smiles at me. I like baby Alice. She holds my fingers. There is a piano. I like the noise. I stand at the piano and press the white and the black. The noise from the black is strange. Miss Kathie sits at the piano with me. She has long brown hair and she looks like someone I know. She smells of flowers and baking. She smells good. She makes the piano sound good. She is kind to me. She smiles and I play. She smiles and I am happy. She smiles and she's Bella. Beautiful Bella, sitting with me as I play a fugue, a prelude, an adagio, a sonata. She sighs softly resting her head on my shoulder and she smiles. *I love listening to you Edward. I love you, Edward.* Bella. Stay with me. You're mine. I love you too.

I wake with a start, but not with fear this time. I feel like I've done something wrong… guilt pervades my being in a way I just don't understand. What the…? Why do I feel guilty? I glance at the clock. It's 5:15 am… I shake off the irrational feeling and clamber out of bed. It's time to visit Miss Swan's building, to check all is well. Pulling on my running gear, a surge of excitement runs through me, swiftly followed by a crippling anxiety… Shit! I will see her today. It's stage three of my campaign. I will try and make her mine once more.

~o~

I am lucky. I have an R&D meeting scheduled for most of today with Barney's and Embry's teams. I love this part of my job and know I will lose myself in the discussions and heated arguments that always evolve during these sessions. They will keep my anxiety at bay. We are gathered in my boardroom where prototypes are scattered over the polished walnut table. There are some seriously bright people working for me, and it's great to see Barney's MIT and Embry's CalTech rivalry on show. Christ, these guys are competitive. We are discussing the solar-powered phone.

"We'll incorporate the solar-cells into the flip," Embry explains.

"Why can't we incorporate them into the entire casing of the phone?" I ask.

Seven pairs of eyes flash to mine.

"Expense?" Barney pipes up.

"Don't concern yourselves with the economics. We'll sell it as a premium brand here for a small fortune and practically give it away in the third world. That's the point."

The room erupts – and two hours later we have three ideas how to cover the fucker in solar cells.

"… And of course we could make it WiMax enabled for the home market," Embry states proudly.

"Tomorrow's technology today. Excellent." I grin in approval. "Ellen, tell me about the conflict mineral issue. How is Procurement dealing with it?"

~o~

I have enjoyed my day for the first time… the first time since Bella left me. As I sit waiting for her in the Merc outside the SIP office, I feel my renewed sense of purpose. My plans are in place. Taylor paces outside. Christ, he looks as nervous as I feel. The thought is… irritating. I check my watch for the four-hundredth time. It's 5.44 pm. She'll be out in a moment.

I tug at my cuffs nervously and rake my hand through my hair. Am I just a free ride to her? Will she have missed me? Will she want me back? I have no idea. Panic knots in my throat. Christ – calm down, Cullen. Focus. Try and relax. I glance once more at the entrance to SIP and she's there, coming towards me. *Fuck.* All the breath is sucked from my body, as if by a powerful vacuum. I gasp at the intensity. There she is – in that dress I like and high black boots, though I barely register her clothing – and in this moment, as I take in her appearance, I know she's suffered as much as I have. Pain courses through me. Her face is pale, almost translucent. There are dark circles beneath her lost and haunted eyes and she's… thinner. Fuck. My shock at her appearance turns to fury. Fuck – rage. She hasn't been eating. She's lost, what? 5-6 lbs in the last few days. She glances at some guy behind her. Who the fuck is that? As she approaches the car I feel wrath hammering through my blood. Taylor opens the door to let her in and she sits down beside me. I can barely hold on to my temper.

"When did you last eat?" I snap as Taylor closes the door.

"Hello Edward, yes, it's nice to see you too."

What. The. Fuck!

"I don't want your smart mouth now," I snarl. "Answer me."

She looks suitably chastised, staring at the hands in her lap. I am fucking livid and she hesitantly trots out some lame explanation.

"Err… I had a yogurt at lunchtime. Oh – and a banana."

That's not fucking eating. I try, really try, to keep a rein on my temper.

"When did you last have a meal?"

She ignores me, and waves to the fucker who followed her out of the building.

"Who's that?"

"My boss."

So that's James Smith. I mentally flip through the employee details I scanned this morning. From Detroit. Scholarship to Princeton. Worked his way from the post-room. Never retains an assistant – they never last more than three months. I have my eye on that fucker, and Jenks will find out more. Focus on the matter in hand, Cullen.

"Well? Your last meal?"

"Edward, that really is none of your concern," she whispers.

And I'm in free-fall. Shit. I am the free ride.

"Whatever you do concerns me. Tell me." Don't write me off, Isabella.

She groans and rolls her eyes, deliberately, to piss me off. And then I see it – a soft smile at the corners of her lips. She's trying not to laugh. It's so refreshing after all the heartache I've suffered that it cracks through my anger. It's so Bella. I find myself unwillingly mirroring her.

"Well?" I ask, my tone much softer.

"Pasta alla vongole… last Friday," she murmurs.

Jesus H Christ, she's not eaten since our last meal together. Part of me wants to beat the fucking shit out of her – but I know I can't ever touch her like that again. What do I do with her? And as I gaze at her, trying to fathom what to do, part of me knows – knows that

she didn't get drunk and meet someone. She's been tucked up in her little white bed on her own. The thought is comforting on some level but I feel so responsible. I am a monster. I did this to her. Shit. How can I ever win her back?

"I see," I mutter non-committally, trying to dampen my anxiety. "You look like you've lost at least 5lbs, possibly more, since then. Please eat, Isabella." What can I say to this precious girl to get her to eat? She doesn't look at me, so I have time to study her beautiful profile. She's so pale and slender. I want to reach out and stroke her cheek. Feel how soft her skin is… check she's real. I turn towards her, itching to touch her.

"How are you?" I ask, because I want to hear her voice.

"If I told you I was fine, I'd be lying."

Shit. She's been suffering – and it's your fault, Cullen.

"Me too. I miss you." I reach over to take her hand. It's small and chilled.

"Edward… I…" she stops, her voice breaking, but she doesn't pull her hand from mine.

"Bella, please. We need to talk."

"Edward… I … please… I have cried so much," she whispers.

"Oh, baby, no." I can bear it no longer. I tug her hand and lift her into my lap, circling her with my arms. The feel of her… I want to groan in frustration. She's so light, so fragile. I bury my nose in her hair, breathing in her intoxicating, soothing Isabella scent. After a beat she relaxes against me, her head resting on my shoulder. She doesn't struggle out of my hold – and it's such a relief. Fuck, I have missed this girl. To feel her in my arms again, it's like I've come home. But I must be careful. I don't want her to bolt again. I hold her, relishing the feeling of her in my arms, just enjoying this moment of tranquility. It's a brief interlude – Taylor reaches the Seattle downtown helipad in record time.

"Come." I reluctantly shift her off my lap. "We're here."

She gazes at me, dark eyes puzzled.

"Helipad – on the top of this building," I explain. How did she think we were getting to Portland? It would take 3 hours to drive at least. Taylor opens her car door and I climb out on my side.

"I should give you back your handkerchief," she says quietly to Taylor.

"Keep it, Miss Swan, with my best wishes."

What the fuck's going on between them?

"Nine?" I say, as pointedly as I can, to remind him of our arrangement.

"Yes sir."

Damn right. Giving fucking handkerchiefs to my Isabella – fucking hell. That's my job. Taking her small hand in mine – the chill has gone, but her hand is still cold – I lead her into the building.

As we reach the elevator, I can't help but smile, recalling our encounter in the elevator at the Heathman. I had hoped to fuck her in one. I shift uncomfortably at the thought and release her hand reluctantly as the doors open, to usher her in.

Is it because she's so near? We're in such an enclosed space… shit. This proximity is arousing as always. Fuck.

She gasps softly.

"I feel it too," I mutter and reach out for her hand, gently caressing her knuckles with my thumb. Fuck. I want her. She gazes at me, her fathomless dark eyes, clouding with desire. She bites her lip. Fuck.

"Please don't bite your lip, Isabella." I want to lean down and kiss her. Make her mine again.

She blinks at me, her lips gently parted. I suppress a groan. How does she do this? Derail me? I am used to control – and I'm practically drooling over her because I can see her teeth pressing into her lip.

"You know what it does to me." Baby, I want to fuck you in this elevator, and right now I don't think you'll let me.

The doors slide open suddenly and we're on the roof, bringing me back to the here and now. In spite of the warm day the wind has picked up. Isabella shivers beside me. I wrap my arm around her as we head out on to the helipad, towards Echo Charlie. The rotors are spinning gently – she's ready for lift-off. Isabella feels so slight. It makes me anxious.

My pilot Stephan runs towards us. We shake hands, and I keep Isabella tucked under my arm. She feels so right there I'm reluctant to relinquish her.

"Ready to go sir. She's all yours!" he roars above the sound of helicopter.

"All checks done?"

"Yes sir."

"You'll collect her around eight-thirty?"

"Yes sir."

"Taylor's waiting for you at the front."

"Thank you sir. Safe flight to Portland. Ma'am." He salutes Isabella and heads to the waiting elevator. We duck down under the rotors and I open the door for her, taking her hand to help her climb aboard.

As I strap her into the seat her breath hitches. The sound goes straight to my groin. I cinch the straps extra tight, trying to ignore my body's reaction to her.

"This should keep you in your place," I mutter. "I must say I do like this harness on you. Don't touch anything." She flushes. Finally some color staining her beautiful cheeks – and I cannot resist. I run the back of my index finger across her cheek, tracing the line of her blush. Oh Christ I want this woman. She scowls at me, and I know it's because she can't move. I hand her some headphones and then sit and buckle in. I run through my pre-flight checks. All instruments look good. I press the throttle to 1500 rpm, transponder to stand-by and position beacon on. Everything is set and ready to go. I put on my headphones, turn the radios on and increase the throttle to 2000 rpm.

When I turn to look at her she's gazing at me.

"Ready, baby?"

"Yes."

She looks so wide-eyed and innocent, and excited too. I can't help my grin as I radio the tower to check they're awake and listening.

"Sea Tac tower this is Echo Charlie – Tango Echo Hotel, cleared for take off to Portland via PDX. Please confirm, over."

"Echo Charlie" the tower squawks back, "You are clear. Sea Tac to call, proceed to 12,000 feet, heading SW 75 degrees. Air speed 165, over. "

"Roger tower, Echo Charlie set, over and out." I check the oil temperature. We're at 104, good. I increase the manifold pressure to 14 and the engine to 2500 rpms, pull back on the throttle and Echo Charlie rises smoothly into the air. Fuck, I love this. I glance once more at Isabella.

"We've chased the dawn, Isabella. Now the dusk." I smile at her and am rewarded with a shy smile in return. Hope stirs again in my chest… yes, I can do this. Yes, I can win her back. Time to dazzle her, Cullen.

"As well as the evening sun… there's more to see this time."

As we gain altitude I give her the tour.

"Escala's over there." I point to home, from where she's been so absent these last few days. "Boeing there – and you can just see the Space Needle."

She stretches to look, curious as ever.

"I've never been."

"I'll take you. We can eat there."

"Edward… we broke up," she exclaims, and I can hear the dismay in her voice. Shit. Don't over-react Cullen.

"I know. I can still take you there. And feed you." I glare at her. She needs to eat. She flushes a lovely pale rose.

"It's very beautiful up here. Thank you," she murmurs, and I note that she's changed the subject.

"Impressive, isn't it?"

"Impressive that you can do this."

"Oh, flattery Miss Swan? But I am a man of many talents."

"I'm fully aware of that, Mr Cullen."

Ha! – Innuendo. From sweet Isabella. I smirk at her. She's obviously relaxing with me. Keep her talking, Cullen.

"How's the new job?"

"Good, thank you. Interesting."

"What's your boss like?"

"Oh… he's okay."

She sounds decidedly lukewarm about Mr James Smith. Shit – I hope he hasn't tried anything.

"What's wrong?" I ask. I want to know – has that fucker done anything inappropriate? I will fire his ass if he has.

"Well, aside from the obvious, nothing."

"The obvious?"

"Oh Edward, you really are very obtuse sometimes." She mocks me.

"Obtuse… me? I'm not sure I appreciate your tone, Miss Swan." I say sardonically, trying to suppress my smile.

"Well don't, then." She quips.

Oh yes. I remember this.

"I have missed your smart mouth," I mutter, and I can't hide my smile.

She gasps and flushes once more, then stares down at the passing suburbs. Oh what I'd like to do to her smart mouth. I shift in my seat. Concentrate, Cullen, for fuck's sake. I check the heading – all is well. We're on track for Portland.

She's quiet, and I steal the occasional glance at her. She is so beautiful. How could I let her walk out of my life? I feel much more relaxed, content even, now that she's here with me in our own bubble, high in the sky. Christ, I hope my plan works… I just need to find the right words. These last few days have shown me that I do need someone – I need her. I want her… but will she have me? Time will tell, Cullen – just take it easy. Don't frighten her off again.

I land smoothly on Portland's only helipad. It's twilight, and I feel a growing sense of urgency. All the peace I felt being beside her, lost in the clouds, evaporates. I need to tell her how I feel. I just have to pick the right moment. I unbuckle my harness as Echo Charlie powers down and lean across to undo hers. I like her strapped down. I wonder briefly if she found all our kinky fuckery distasteful. If memory serves me correctly, I think she enjoyed it as much as I did. And I can have fun without hurting her. The thought is very appealing – too appealing, and I swiftly check my arousal.

"Good trip, Miss Swan?" Keep it light, Cullen.

"Yes, thank you, Mr Cullen."

"Well, let's go and see the boy's photos." I open the door, jump down and hold my hand out for her.

Joe is waiting to greet us. He's as old as the hills, and what he doesn't know about flying you could write on the back of a postage stamp. I have a soft spot for old Joe, who flew Sikorskys in Korea for casualty evacuation. Boy, does he have some hair-raising stories.

"Joe, keep her safe for Stephan. He'll be along around eight or nine."

"Will do, Mr Cullen. Ma'am. Your car's waiting downstairs, sir. Oh, and the elevator's out of order, you'll need to use the stairs."

"Thank you, Joe."

As we head for the emergency stairs, I eye Isabella's high heels and remember once more her tumbling into my office.

"Good thing this is only three floors, in those heels."

"Don't you like the boots?" she asks innocently.

An unwelcome vision of them hooked over my shoulders springs to mind.

"I like them very much, Isabella," I mutter, hoping my expression doesn't reveal my lascivious thoughts. "Come. We'll take it slow. I don't want you falling and breaking your neck." It also gives me an excuse to get my hands on her. I snake my arm around her waist and we slowly descend the stairs.

In the car on the way to the gallery my anxiety returns. This is the show of her so-called friend – the man who, last time I saw him, was trying to put his tongue in her mouth. Perhaps over the last few days they've talked… perhaps this is a long-anticipated rendezvous between them. Fuck, I hope not.

"Jake is just a friend," she says softly.

She knows what I'm thinking? Am I that obvious? Since when? Since she stripped me of all my armor. I shift to gaze at her in wonder. How does she know me so well? She stares back at me and my stomach tightens.

"Those beautiful eyes look too large in your face, Isabella. Please tell me you'll eat."

"Yes, Edward, I'll eat," she mutters, her voice laced with sarcasm.

"I mean it."

"Do you now?" Her sarcasm continues and I almost have to sit on my hands. It's time to declare myself.

"I don't want to fight with you, Isabella. I want you back and I want you healthy."

She blinks at me – her startled rabbit look.

"But nothing's changed," she says softly.

Oh, Bella, it has – there's been a seismic shift in me. We pull up at the gallery and I have no time to explain before the show.

"Let's talk on the way back. We're here."

I clamber out of the car, walk round to her side and open her door. She looks mad as she climbs out.

"Why do you do that?" she shouts at me.

"Do what?" Fuck – what's this?

"Say something like that and then just stop."

That's it – that's why you're mad? Thank fuck.

"Isabella, we're here. Where you want to be. Let's do this and then talk. I don't particularly want a scene in the street."

She presses her lips together and mutters petulantly,

"Okay."

I take her hand and charge into the gallery, pulling her behind me.

It's in one of those converted warehouses that are all the rage at the moment. See one and you've seen them all. It's light and airy, in spite of the dark floors and brick walls. Portland's cognoscenti are sipping cheap wine and chatting in hushed tones while they admire the photography.

"Good evening, and welcome to Jacob Black's show." A young woman greets us. I want to roll my eyes when she gapes at me. Yes, yes – it's only skin-deep, sugar. Look elsewhere. Finally she seems to recover herself.

"Oh, it's you, Bella. We'll want your take on all this too." She grins at Bella, then hands me a brochure and points us towards the drinks table. Bella frowns, and the little v forms above her nose. I want to kiss it… again.

"You know her?"

She shakes her head and looks puzzled. I shrug. Well… this is Portland.

"What would you like to drink?" I ask.

"I'll have a glass of white wine, thank you."

As I head for the table I hear a loud exclamation.

"Bella! "

When I look round that boy is hugging my girl. Fuck. I can't hear what they're saying, but Bella closes her eyes, and for one horrible moment I think she's going to burst into tears. She remains composed however as he holds her at arm's length, appraising her. Shit – yeah, she looks that miserable because of me. She seems to be trying to reassure him. He looks really fucking interested in her… I mean… too interested. I can feel anger coursing through my blood. Back off, buddy, she's mine.

"The work here is impressive, don't you think?" an effete young man asks me.

"I've not looked round yet." I answer and turn to the barman. "Two glasses of white wine."

I glance round and she's staring at me, her dark eyes large and luminous. My blood thickens and I can't tear my gaze away from her. Those boots are fucking hot… and the way her hair falls down around her face to her breasts… Fuck – control yourself, Cullen. The boy asks her a question and she breaks our eye contact. I frown. He's all white-toothed smiles and broad shoulders and sharp suit. He's a good-looking son-of-a-bitch, I'll give him that. She smiles brightly at something he says, a dazzling smile. I'd like her to smile at me like that… then he leans down and kisses her cheek. *Fucker*. I grab the glasses of wine from the barman, ignore the young man beside me who's talking about photography in general or some such crap, and head back to her.

She's gazing at one of the boy's photographs, lost in thought. It's a landscape of a lake, and not without merit, I suppose. She glances up at me, her eyes assessing and anxious, as I hand her a glass of wine and take a quick sip of mine. Christ, it's disgusting… an over-oaked Chardonnay.

"Does it come up to scratch?" She sounds amused, but I have no idea what she's referring to – the exhibition, the building?

"The wine," she clarifies.

"No. Rarely does at these kind of events," I mutter quietly. "The boy's quite talented isn't he?"

"Why else do you think I asked him to take your portrait?" she says proudly, and it irks me. She's proud of him, like she has a stake in his success… because she cares about him, cares about him too much. The thought makes me jealous. That's such a new feeling, one that I've only ever felt around her – and I don't like it.

"Edward Cullen?" The damned pap from some Portland rag interrupts my dark thoughts.

"Can I have a picture, Sir?"

I want to tell him to fuck off, but decide to remain polite. I don't want Sam dealing with a press backlash.

"Sure." I reach out and snake my arm around Isabella, pulling her to my side. I want everyone to know she's mine. The photographer starts snapping.

"Mr Cullen, thank you," he mutters in appreciation.

I nod at him.

"Miss…?" he asks of Isabella.

"Swan," she murmurs shyly.

"Thank you, Miss Swan."

He slithers off and Isabella steps out of my grasp. I'm reluctant to let her go. She gazes up at me.

"I looked for pictures of you with dates on the Internet. There were none. That's why Rose thought you were gay," she says.

"Oh, that explains the question. No – I don't do dates, Isabella, only with you. But you know that." And I'd like to do more dates with you, baby. Lots more.

"So you never took your…" She quickly glances over her shoulder to check no one's listening – "Subs out?" She flushes slightly. I want to snort with laughter. She's so innocent.

"Sometimes. Not on dates. Shopping, you know," I explain, trying to hide my amusement. And then I think about it… the only one I've ever wanted more with is her.

"Just you, Isabella," I whisper, and I want to say so much more. I want to ask her how she feels, if she'll take me back. But this is just too public a setting. She blushes again that delicious pale rose and stares down at her fingers. I need to get her out of here, get her on her own. Then we can talk properly… and I want to feed her. The sooner we've seen everything the sooner we can leave.

"Your friend here seems more of a landscape man, not portraits. Let's look round." I hold out my hand and I'm childishly delighted when she puts her hand in mine.

We stroll round the gallery, stopping briefly at each photograph. Though I begrudge this boy the feelings he evokes from the lovely Isabella, I have to admit he's quite good. We turn the corner – and stop. There she is, seven full-blown portraits of her. She looks jaw-droppingly beautiful… and natural… and relaxed. Laughing, scowling, pouting, thoughtful, amused… and in one of them, wistful and sad. And in that moment I know. I know he wants to be much more than her friend. They are his homage to her – love letters, all over the gallery walls for every fucker to stare at. Before I know what I'm saying the words are out.

"Seems I'm not the only one."

She too is staring at them, stunned, as surprised as I am to see them. Well, there's no way anyone else is having these. The thought makes my blood heat… I hope they're for sale.

"Excuse me," I mutter and head for the reception desk. I want those pictures. The gallery director is amazed that I want to buy them all. I hand her my credit card.

"I'd like them delivered as soon as possible."

"They're due to hang for the duration of the exhibition," she smiles too warmly at me. When I give her my full kilowatt grin she adds, flustered, "But I'm sure we can arrange something." And she's all fingers and thumbs as she processes my card payment. Women… it never fails. It's just a pretty face, sweetheart – you really don't want to look any closer. She hands me back my card, all flushed and fluttering eyelashes. Managing a polite smile for her, I head back to Isabella. Fuck – I leave her for one moment and the wolves descend. There's a guy talking animatedly to her, all smiles and blond good looks… back off, she's mine. Bella jumps slightly as I take her elbow. The blond fucker grins at me.

"You're a lucky guy," he says, far too good-naturedly for my liking.

"That I am," I snarl at him. Now fuck off. He can read the cues… he backs off immediately.

"Did you just buy one of these?" she asks wide-eyed, when we're alone again.

"One of these?" I snort.

"You bought more than one?"

She really has no idea.

"I bought them all, Isabella. I don't want some stranger ogling you in the privacy of their own home."

She gapes at me.

"You'd rather it was you?" she says breathlessly, mockingly.

She really, really has no idea at all, no idea how lovely and beautiful she is… it's staggering. The thought of someone else poring over all these photographs is an anathema to me. She's *mine.*

"Frankly… yes."

"Per-vert." she mouths at me, and she's trying not to laugh.

I gaze down at her. Fuck she's challenging, and funny.

"Can't argue with that assessment, Isabella."

"I'd discuss it further with you, but I've signed an NDA," she says haughtily. Why does she always come back at me with this stuff? Christ, I'd like to put her in her place – preferably under me… or on her knees.

"What I'd like to do to your smart mouth," I lean in close and murmur.

She gasps.

"You're very rude," she scolds, flushing crimson.

I smirk down at her. Oh baby, that's old news. I glance back at the photographs.

"You look very relaxed in these photographs, Isabella. I don't see you like that very often."

She blinks at me, all brown-eyed innocence, then stares down at her fingers as if she's over-thinking something. Look at me. I want to know what you're thinking. Reaching forward I tilt her head up, and she gasps as my fingers make contact with her flesh. Again, that sound… I feel it in my groin.

"I want you that relaxed with me," I whisper urgently.

"You have to stop intimidating me if you want that," she snaps back.

"You have to learn to communicate, and tell me how you feel!"

Shit… are we doing this here, now? I want to do this in privacy. She steels herself and seems to draw herself up to full height. Shit – where is this going?

"Edward, you wanted me as a submissive. That's where the problem lies. It's in the definition of a submissive – you emailed it to me once." She pauses, glaring at me. "I think the synonyms were, and I quote, 'compliant, pliant, amenable, passive, tractable, resigned, patient, docile, tame, subdued'. I wasn't supposed to look at you. Not talk to you, unless you gave me permission to do so. What do you expect?" she hisses.

Fuck – we need to discuss this in private! Why is she doing this here?

"It's very confusing being with you," she continues, in full flow. "You don't want me to defy you, but then you like my 'smart mouth'. You want obedience except when you don't, so you can punish me. I just don't know which way is up when I'm with you."

Okay, I can see that could be confusing – but I really don't want to discuss it here.

"Good point well made, as usual, Miss Swan." I can't keep the chill from my voice. "Come… let's go and eat."

"We've only been here for half an hour."

"You've seen the photos, you've spoken to the boy."

"His name is Jake," she snaps angrily.

"You've spoken to *Jake* – the man who, if I am not mistaken, was trying to push his tongue into your mouth the last time I met him, while you were drunk and ill," I growl at her.

"He's never hit me," she snarls, her eyes blazing with fury.

What the fuck? She does want to do this now… I can't believe it. Anger streaks through my body.

"That's a low blow, Isabella," I whisper, seething.

She flushes, and I don't know if it's from embarrassment or anger. I run my hands through my hair to prevent me from grabbing her and dragging her outside and really showing her how mad I am right now.

"I'm taking you for something to eat. You're fading away in front of me. Find the boy, say goodbye." My voice is clipped as I attempt to rein in my temper. She gapes at me, stunned.

"Please can we stay longer?"

"No. Go. Now. Say goodbye." I only just manage not to shout at her. I recognize that stubborn mulish set to her mouth. She's mad as hell, and in spite of all I've been through over the last few days I don't give a shit. We are leaving if I have to pick her up bodily and carry her out of here. She gives me a withering look and turns sharply on her heel, her hair flying so that it hits my shoulder. She stalks angrily off towards Jake. As she moves away from me I struggle to recover some of my equilibrium. What is it about her that presses all my buttons? I want to shout at her, beat her… fuck her. Here. Now. And in that order.

He beams at her again, like she lights up his whole damn life, and ignores the female groupies clustered around him. He listens intently to everything she has to say, like he cares, then he sweeps her into his arms, spinning her round. *Get the fuck off my girl.* She weaves her hands into his hair, and she's whispering to the fucker! Before I'm even aware that I'm doing it, I am striding over, ready to rip him limb from limb.

Fortunately for him, he releases her as I reach them.

"Don't be a stranger, Bells… Oh Mr Cullen, good evening," the boy mutters.

"Mr Black – very impressive. I'm sorry we can't stay longer, but *we* need to head back to Seattle. Isabella?" I take her hand.

"'Bye, Jake. Congratulations again." She gives him a quick kiss on the cheek and I can take no more. I think I am going to have a coronary. It takes all my self-control not to put her over my shoulder. I pull her to the front door and out on to the street. I can feel her stumbling behind me, trying to keep up, but I don't care… right now… I just want to… There's an alley. I drag her into it and before I know what I'm doing I've slammed her against the wall. I grab her face between my hands, pinning her body against the wall with my own as rage and desire mix in a heady explosive cocktail. I capture her mouth in mine, so violently that our teeth clash, and my tongue is in her mouth. She tastes of cheap wine and delicious Bella… oh this mouth. I have missed this mouth. Desire flames through my body, like a forest fire through dry tinder. I am so aroused – I want her now, here, in this alley.

I'm met with her unexpected ardor. And what was intentioned as a punishing-I-own-you kiss turns into something else. Fuck – her fingers are in my hair, pulling hard. She moans into my mouth and she's kissing me back, her passion unleashed. She wants this too… it's so arousing. I groan in response, undone. One hand holds her at the nape of her neck. My free hand travels down her body, feeling her breast, her waist, her ass, her thigh. I want to pull up her dress, fuck her here. Yes – she ignites around me. Yes – she wants this too. She's missed this too. *The feel of her.* It's intoxicating and I want her like I've never wanted her before. No! No! Cullen! Not like a cheap hooker in an alley. Get a fucking grip. I pull back, gazing down at her, mad as hell.

"You. Are. Mine!" I pant, and push myself away from her, practically sinking to my knees. Has anyone ever affected me like this? Ever?

"For the love of God Bella," I breathe. I bend over, hands on my knees, trying to catch my breath and calm my raging body. I am so hard for her right now. Christ, I nearly fucked this innocent in a back-alley.

"I'm sorry," she whispers, all breathless and panting too.

"You should be," I snarl. "I know what you were doing. Do you want the photographer, Isabella? He obviously has feelings for you."

"No. He's just a friend," she mutters contritely… and it goes some way towards calming me.

"I have spent all my adult life trying to avoid any extreme emotion… and yet you… you bring out feelings in me that are completely alien. It's very…" Words fail me, completely inadequate to describe how out of control I feel in this moment.

"Unsettling," is the best I can manage. "I like control, Bella… and round you… that just…" I stand gazing down at her, "…evaporates."

She's flushed and beautiful, her dark eyes wide with carnal promise, her hair mussed and wild around her. I run my hand through my hair, thankful that I've recovered some semblance of self-control. See what you do to me, Bella. See? I run my hand through my hair again, taking deep thought-clearing breaths. I grab her hand.

"Come, we need to talk," I mutter. Before I fuck you. "And you need to eat."

There's a restaurant opposite the alley. It's cheap and cheerful, but Taylor will be with us shortly so I can't shop around.

"This place will have to do," I mutter as I lead her in. "We don't have much time." I note with irony that the walls are painted the same color as my playroom. I don't dwell on the thought. The smarmy waiter leads us to a secluded table, all smiles for my sweet Isabella.

"We don't have long, so we'll each have sirloin steak, cooked medium, béarnaise sauce if you have it, fries and green vegetables, whatever the chef has – and bring me the wine list." I glare at him.

"Certainly sir," he says surprised. Yes, like I said, we're in a hurry and I don't want to fuck about. He scuttles off.

Bella pouts at me, annoyed. Fuck, what now?

"And if I don't like steak?"

"Don't start, Isabella," I sigh.

"I am not a child, Edward."

"Well, stop acting like one," I snap at her.

She blinks at me, her expression one of hurt.

"I'm a child because I don't like steak?" she asks, her voice high and petulant.

"For deliberately making me jealous. It's a childish thing to do. Have you no regard for your friend's feelings – leading him on like that?"

She flushes, then looks mortified and full of remorse.

The waiter returns with the wine list, giving me a chance to control my temper. I glance at the average looking selection and I can't resist.

"Would you like to choose the wine?" I ask, too sweetly.

"You choose," she mutters mulishly, and presses her lips together. Don't play games with me, baby.

"Two glasses of the Borossa Valley Shiraz, please."

"Err, we only sell that wine by the bottle, sir."

"A bottle then," I snap. You stupid prick.

"Sir." He retreats.

"You're very grumpy," she mutters, no doubt feeling sorry for the supercilious jerk. I gaze at her as impassively as I can manage.

"I wonder why that is?" And even to my own ears I sound petulant.

"Well, it's good to set the right tone for an intimate and honest discussion about the future, wouldn't you say?" She smiles too sweetly back at me. Oh, tit for tat Miss Swan – and she's called me out again. I have to admire her courage. I can feel a smile threatening, and I do my best to stop it.

"I'm sorry," I say. She's right.

"Apology accepted… and I'm pleased to inform you I haven't decided to become a vegetarian since we last ate."

"Since that ***was*** the last time you ate, I think that's a moot point."

"There's that word again… moot."

"Moot," I mouth and this time I can't help my ironic smile. That word… I remember I last used it while discussing our on Saturday morning. Just before my world fell apart.

"Bella, the last time we spoke, you left me. I'm a little nervous. I've told you I want you back, and you've said – nothing." I gaze at her and watch the color drain from her face. Shit.

"I've missed you – really missed you, Edward. The past five days have been… difficult." She swallows and takes a steadying breath. Shit, this doesn't look good. Perhaps my behavior over the last hour has finally driven her away. I stop breathing.

"But nothing's changed. I can't be what you want me to be," she whispers.

"You are what I want you to be." You are everything I want you to be.

"No, Edward, I'm not."

Oh Bella, please believe me.

"You're upset because of what happened last time. I behaved, stupidly, and you… Why didn't you safe-word, Isabella?"

She blinks at me as if I've pulled the rug from beneath her feet.

"Answer me," I urge, and as I watch she kind of shrinks and folds up on herself in front of me.

"I forgot," she whispers.

"You forgot!" I gasp in dismay. We've been through all this shit because she *forgot?* Fuck! Why didn't I remind her? What a fucking fool I am… she didn't ask me to stop. Would she ever?

"How can I trust you? Ever?" I exclaim. Shit. If she can't be honest with me… what hope do we have? My spirits sink… Fuck!

The waiter arrives with the wine as we gaze disbelievingly at each other. He takes his sweet time opening the bottle as theatrically as possible. Who the fuck is he trying to impress? He pours a glass. I take a quick sip. It needs to breathe, but it's passable.

"That's fine."

He fills our glasses and then goes. We haven't taken our eyes off each other. Each trying to fathom what the other is thinking. She takes a sip and closes her eyes in appreciation, and for a moment I am transported, enjoying her sensual tribute to the wine. She opens her eyes and gazes at me.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"Sorry for what?" I ask. Is there no hope? Fuck!

"Not using the safe word."

Welcome relief courses through me.

"We might have avoided all this… suffering," I mutter, in an attempt to hide my relief.

"You look fine," she says softly.

"Appearances can be deceptive. I am not fine. I feel like the sun has set and not risen for five days Bella. I'm in perpetual night here." She gapes at me in breathless shock. Okay… here goes.

"You said you'd never leave, and yet, the going gets tough and you're out the door." I mutter, and I can't keep the petulant accusation out of my voice.

"When did I say I'd never leave?"

"In your sleep. It was the most comforting thing I've heard in so long, Isabella. It made me relax."

She gapes at me again.

"You said you loved me," I whisper… and though the words tear at me, I have to know if she still feels that way. "Is that now in the past tense?"

"No Edward, it's not," she murmurs, her eyes bright with sincerity. And relief floods through me again.

"Good," I mutter. I want to stop thinking about that right now. Fortunately the waiter returns with our meal.

"Eat," I snap.

She eyes her plate with distaste. I see red.

"So help me God, Isabella, if you don't eat, I will take you across my knee here in this restaurant. And it will have nothing to do with my sexual gratification. Eat!" I hiss.

"Okay. I'll eat. Stow your twitching palm please." She's trying for humor – but I am not laughing. She's wasting away. Stupid little… She picks up her cutlery like she's

under some kind of death sentence and I resist the urge to roll my eyes at her. She takes one bite… and closes her eyes and licks her lips. The sight of her small pink tongue is enough to arouse me. Christ, not again! I stop my body in its tracks. There'll be time for this later… if she says yes.

We eat. Saying nothing. So she hasn't told me to fuck off… yet. As I surreptitiously watch her I can't help but realize how much I am enjoying just being in her company. Okay, so I'm tied up in all kinds of emotional knots… but she's here. She's with me and she's eating. I feel hopeful we can make my proposition work. Her reaction to me in the alley was… visceral. She still wants me. I know I could have fucked her there and she wouldn't have stopped me.

"Do you know who's singing?" She interrupts my reverie.

A young woman with a soft lyrical voice…

"No – but she's good, whoever she is."

"I like her too."

I hope I'll get to give her the iPod… I hope she likes the songs I have chosen.

"What?" she asks. Shit, rumbled. Sometimes I wonder if she can read my mind.

I shake my head.

"Eat up," I mutter.

"I can't manage any more. Have I eaten enough for sir?"

Is she deliberately trying to goad me? I gaze at her, and decide not. If she hasn't eaten much over the last few days she's probably full. I glance at my watch. Taylor should be along soon.

"I am really full," she adds.

"We have to go shortly. Taylor's here and you have to be up for work in the morning." I hadn't considered that before. She's working now – she needs sleep. I may have to revise my plans and my body's expectations. The thought displeases me.

"So do you."

"I function on a lot less sleep than you do, Isabella. Well, at least you've eaten something."

"Aren't we going back via Echo Charlie?"

"No, I thought I might have a drink – Taylor will collect us. Besides, this way I have you in the car all to myself – for a few hours at least. What can we do but talk?" And I can put my proposition to you. I shift uncomfortably in my chair. Stage three of the campaign has not gone as smoothly as I anticipated. As usual she has derailed me. But I can turn this round, close this deal in the car, surely. Summoning the waiter I ask for the check, then call Taylor. He answers on the second ring.

"Mr Cullen."

"We're at Le Picotin, South West 3rd Avenue." I hang up.

"You're very brusque with Taylor… in fact, with most people," she scolds.

"I just get to the point quickly, Isabella."

"You haven't got to the point this evening. Nothing's changed, Edward." Touché, Miss Swan. Okay Cullen, it's shit or bust time.

"I have a proposition for you."

"This started with a proposition," she quips.

"A different proposition," I clarify.

She arches an eyebrow skeptically at me. The waiter returns, and I give him my card, not taking my eyes off her. I can tell she's intrigued. Good. Fuck, I can feel my heart rate pick up. I hope she goes for this… or I really will be lost. The waiter hands me the credit card slip to sign. I enter an obscenely large tip and write my name with a flourish. The waiter beams at me. Yeah smile at me, don't smile at my girl. My phone buzzes and I peer at the text. Taylor's arrived. The waiter hands my card back and disappears.

"Come. Taylor's outside."

We both stand and I take her hand.

"I don't want to lose you, Isabella," I murmur, gazing into her dark startled eyes. I pull her hand up to my lips and brush her knuckles tenderly. Her lips part as she inhales sharply.

Taylor is waiting at the curb. I open her door and walk round to the driver's side. Taylor climbs out to open the door for me.

"I've got this, thanks Taylor. Did you bring your iPod?"

"Yes sir. I'll wear it the whole way home."

"What are you listening to?"

"Puccini, sir."

"Tosca?"

"La Bohème."

"Good choice." I smile. As ever, he surprises me. I'd always figured his musical tastes leaned towards country and rock. Taking a deep breath I climb into the car. I am about to negotiate the deal of my life, as Taylor heads out into the traffic.

Isabella gazes at me expectantly. I shift to face her.

"As I was saying, Isabella, I have a proposition for you."

She glances nervously at Taylor, as I knew she would.

“Taylor can’t hear you.”

“What?” she frowns.

“Taylor,” I call. Taylor doesn’t respond. I call him again and then lean over and tap his shoulder. He removes an earbud.

“Yes sir?”

“Thank you Taylor, It’s okay – resume your listening.”

“Sir.”

“Happy now? He’s listening to his iPod. Forget he’s here. I do.”

“Did you deliberately ask him to do that?”

“Yes.”

She blinks at me surprised.

“Okay… your proposition,” she says nervously.

I’m nervous too, baby. Here goes. Don’t blow this Cullen.

“Let me ask you something first. Do you want a regular vanilla relationship, with no kinky fuckery at all?”

“Kinky fuckery?” she squeaks gaping at me.

“Kinky fuckery.”

“I can’t believe you said that.” She looks nervously at Taylor again.

“Well I did. Answer me.”

“I like your kinky fuckery,” she whispers.

I blow out gently in relief, knowing she can’t see me in the dark. Step one… okay. Keep cool Cullen.

“That’s what I thought. So what don’t you like?”

She’s silent for a moment… her dark eyes scrutinizing me.

"The threat of cruel and unusual punishment," she says eventually.

"What does that mean?"

"Well you have all those… things in your playroom, the canes, and whips and stuff… and they frighten the living daylights out of me. I don't want you to use them on me."

This I have worked out for myself, I think ironically.

"Okay, so no whips or canes. Or belts, for that matter," I add, unable to keep the irony out of my voice.

As we pass a street lamp I can see her puzzled frown.

"Are you attempting to redefine the hard limits?"

"Not as such. I'm just trying to understand you – get a clearer picture of what you do and don't like."

"Fundamentally Edward, it's your joy in inflicting pain on me that's difficult for me to handle. And the idea that you'll do it because I have crossed some arbitrary line."

Fuck. I ignore her first comment. I am not going there, or I will blow this deal. I concentrate on the second half of her sentence.

"But it's not arbitrary – the rules are written down."

"I don't want a set of rules."

"None at all?" Shit – she might touch me. Fuck. How can I legislate against that? And suppose she does something stupid that puts herself at risk?

"No rules," she states emphatically.

Okay, million dollar question.

"But you don't mind if I spank you?"

"Spank me with what?"

"This." I hold up my hand.

She shifts in her seat… and a silent joy unfurls deep in my gut. Oh baby, I love it when you squirm.

"No… not really. Especially with those silver balls…"

My cock twitches at the thought. Fuck.

"Yes, that was fun." My voice is gruff.

"More than fun," she mutters.

"So you can deal with some pain," I can't keep the hope out of my voice.

She shrugs.

"Yes, I suppose," she swallows nervously.

Okay… so we may be able to structure a deal round this. Deep breath Cullen, give her the deal terms.

"Isabella, I want to start again. Do the vanilla thing and then maybe, once you trust me more – and I trust you to be honest and to communicate with me – we could move on and do some of the things that I like to do." That's it. Fuck. I wait. Wait for her reaction. My wellbeing, my equilibrium hangs in the balance… and she says… Nothing! She stares at me and because it's dark I have no idea what she's thinking. It's purgatory.

"But what about punishments?" she says eventually. I close my eyes. It's not a no.

"No punishments. None."

"And the rules?"

"No rules."

"None at all? But you have needs…"

"I need you more, Isabella. These last few days have been purgatory. All my instincts tell me to let you go, I don't deserve you… those photos the boy took – I can see how he sees you. You look so… untroubled… beautiful – not that you're not beautiful now – but here you sit, and I can see your pain and it's so hard knowing that I'm the one who has made you feel this way. But I'm a selfish man. I've wanted you since you fell into my office. You are… exquisite, honest, warm, strong, witty, beguilingly innocent… the list is endless. I am in awe of you. I want you, and the thought of anyone else having you is like a knife twisting in my darkened soul." Fuck… quite a speech Cullen!

"Edward, why do you think you have a darkened soul?" she cries passionately, totally stunning me. "I would never say that… sad maybe… but you are a good man. I can see

that – you're generous, you're kind, you've never lied to me. And I haven't tried very hard – last Saturday was such a shock to my system – it was my wake-up call. I realised that you had been easy on me, and that I couldn't be the person you wanted me to be, and then, after I left, it dawned on me that the physical pain you inflicted was not as bad as the pain of losing you. I do want to please you… but it's hard."

"You please me all the time," I whisper. When will she understand this? "How often do I have to tell you that?"

"I never know what you're thinking. Sometimes you're so closed… like an Island State… you intimidate me. That's why I keep quiet. I don't know which way your mood is going to go… it swings from north to south and back again in a nanosecond. It's confusing… and you won't let me touch you, when I want to, so much… just to show you how much I love you."

My gut disappears. She said it again. I gape at her and she suddenly unfastens her seatbelt and crawls into my lap, totally taking me by surprise. She takes my head in her hands… Christ!

"I love you, Edward. And you're prepared to do all this for me. I'm the one who is undeserving. I'm just sorry that I can't do all those things for you. Maybe with time – I don't know – but… Yes, I accept your proposition. Where do I sign?" She curls her arms around my neck and holds me.

I can't believe what I'm hearing. Joy bursts in my chest… she's going to try. I get her back. She's mine again. I don't deserve her, and I get her back. I wrap my arms around her and hold her tightly, burying my nose in her sweet, fragrant hair, as relief and a myriad of emotions flow through me.

"Oh Bella," I breathe, and I sit holding her, too stunned to say anything else. She snuggles into my arms, her head on my shoulder, as Rachmaninov plays softly over the car sound system. I go over her words… I can't believe she still loves me – but this time, I don't fear the words. I'd fear if she didn't. But touching me… No, she can't touch me. I have to make her understand this. Manage her expectations. I gently stroke her back.

"Touching is a hard limit for me, Isabella," I murmur into her hair.

"I know. I wish I understood why," she says softly, her breath tickling my neck.

Shall I tell her? Why would she want to know this shit? My shit? Maybe I can hint at it… give her a clue.

"I had an horrific childhood. I think one of the crack-whore's pimps…" Beat me… burned me… broke me. "I can remember that." And anyone's touch reminds me of him.

I shudder, and she tightens her arms around my neck.

"Was she abusive…? Your mother?"

"Not that I remember. She was neglectful. I think it was me who looked after her. When she finally killed herself, it took four days for someone to raise the alarm, and find us… I remember that." I close my eyes… and see vague, muted images of my mother slumped on the floor, me curling up beside her… and I don't know if they're from my dreams or my memories.

Isabella gasps.

"Well, that's pretty… fucked-up," she whispers.

"Fifty shades," I mutter.

She kisses me softly, tenderly, and a wave of emotion crashes through me… one I don't understand. I hold her tighter and kiss her hair. She's my solace and comfort. Leaning back I close my eyes, saying nothing more, because I have nothing more to say. I listen to the music, and when it's finished, to her soft, even breathing. She's asleep. She's exhausted. Like me. And I know I can't spend the night with her. She'll get no sleep if I do… I won't be able to be with her and not touch her, not make love to her. I hold her, enjoying her weight on me, honored that she can sleep on me. She's so precious. Fuck… and she's mine. I've done it. Won her back. I can't help my self-satisfied grin. Now I've got to keep her… that will be challenging enough. My first vanilla relationship – who would have thought? I imagine Irina's face when I tell her and I beam even more.

The car nears her street. Reluctantly I wake her.

"Hey," I murmur softly.

"Sorry," she mumbles sleepily, and stretches.

"I like to watch you sleep."

"Did I say anything?"

"No. We're nearly at your place."

"We're not going to yours?" She sounds surprised.

"No."

She sits up straight and glares at me.

"Why not?"

"Because you have work tomorrow."

"Oh." she pouts.

I smirk at her. Well, at least she wants me. This is a good thing.

"Why, did you have something in mind?" I tease.

"Well… maybe," she mutters shyly. Even now she can't say the words. It makes me chuckle. She's so bold in some ways – yet still so shy and innocent.

"Isabella, I am not going to touch you again, not until you beg me to." That will get you talking, more comfortable with discussing sex. Discussing everything. Telling me what you need.

"What?!"

"So that you'll start communicating with me. Next time we make love, you're going to have to tell me exactly what you want, in fine detail."

"Oh…" She's shocked into silence. I move her off my lap as Taylor pulls up at her apartment and clamber out to hold the door open for her. She looks adorably sleepy and mussed up.

"I have something for you." I mutter. Stage four of my campaign. Opening the trunk I take out the large gift box. She gazes at me, stupefied.

"Open it when you get inside."

"You're not coming in?"

"No, Isabella."

"So when will I see you?"

"Tomorrow."

"My boss wants me to go for drink with him tomorrow."

Not that fucker! Calm down, Cullen. Deal with him later.

"Does he now?" I mutter.

"To celebrate my first week."

"Where?"

"I don't know."

"I could pick you up from there."

"Okay… I'll text you."

"Good."

I walk with her to the lobby door and watch while she digs around in her purse for her keys. She unlocks the door – and I can resist her no longer. Leaning down I cup her chin in my fingers. I want to kiss her hard, but I hold back, and trace soft kisses from her temple to her mouth.

"Until tomorrow," I breathe.

"Goodnight Edward," she whispers and I can hear her longing. It makes me smile.

"In you go." I order, and it's one of the hardest things I've ever done. Letting her go in on her own, knowing that she's mine for the taking. But there's always tomorrow, and she needs to sleep… but my body ignores my noble gesture and stiffens in anticipation. I shake my head, amazed as ever how much I lust after this beautiful girl.

"Laters Baby," I call, and turning on my heel head back to the car.

I lie in bed and stare at the ceiling for a moment. Mission accomplished, Cullen. I grin broadly, turn on my side and within seconds fall into a deep, dreamless, restful sleep.

Outtake 4: Chapter 57 Edward & Bella "Reconnect"

EPOV

We sit in the back of the Merc.

"So, do you want to beg at my place or yours?" I ask, cocking my head to one side, grinning.

Fuck she looks good. She's slept. She's eaten. Her healthy glow has returned.

I could fuck her in the car… I want to. Taylor might object. Fuck that, I pay him enough money…

"I think you're being very presumptuous, Mr Cullen. But by way of a change, we could go to my apartment," she says huskily and all provocative, then bites her lip, deliberately.

Christ, that's arousing. I shift in my seat.

"Taylor – Miss Swan's, please." I try and sound as cool and calm as I can. I want to yell at him to make it quick.

"Sir," Taylor acknowledges, and he heads off into the traffic.

She's gazing at me with her half-amused smile, and I don't know if she's laughing at me or at some thought she finds funny. I can't help but grin back. Christ it's good to see her. I have been looking forward to this since last night. I can't wait to get my hands on her.

"So how has your day been?" I ask.

"Good. Yours?" she grins, mirroring my expression.

"Good, thank you." I reply politely… but still with the inane smile on my face. We must look like a pair of Cheshire cats.

Taking her hand I plant a gentle kiss on her knuckles. Her breath hitches and her grin broadens. The sound goes straight to my cock.

"You look lovely," I murmur.

"As do you."

“Your boss, James Smith. Is he good at his job?” She blinks and frowns.

“Why? This isn’t about your pissing contest?” I smirk at her. No, that fucker is dangerous.

“That man wants into your panties, Isabella.” I try to sound as neutral as possible. She flushes and her mouth pops open in shock. Shocked Isabella – I’ve missed her. The expression she’s wearing now is one of my favorites.

“Well, he can want all he likes. Why are we even having this conversation? You know I have no interest in him whatsoever. He’s just my boss…”

She tries to sound haughty, but her flush suggests that she’s embarrassed. Baby, baby, baby. He wants you. He’s a sexual predator and you can’t see it.

“That’s the point. He wants what’s mine. I need to know if he’s good at his job.” Because otherwise I am going to fire his ass.

She shrugs and looks uncertainly down at her fingers. Shit… Has he tried something already? He has a very dubious history with his assistants. They never stay long at SIP.

“I think so,” Bella says, but she doesn’t sound convinced. Hell. She’s only been there a week – maybe it’s too early for her to form an opinion.

“Well, he’d better leave you alone, or he’ll find himself on his ass on the sidewalk.” I mutter, dispassionately.

“Oh Edward,” she scolds.

“What are you talking about? He hasn’t done anything wrong.” She frowns again and the very kissable small v forms above her nose. Why is she frowning? Does she suspect he’s after her too? The thought displeases me. I know I need to rebuild some trust between us, but she should tell me if she finds him threatening.

“He makes one move, you tell me. It’s called gross moral turpitude, or sexual harassment.” Talk to me, Isabella. I’ll listen, I promise. I don’t want to lose you again.

“It was just a drink after work,” she mutters.

“I mean it. One move and he’s out.”

“You don’t have *that* kind of power,” She scoffs. Then her eyes widen in sudden shock. Fuck! What is it?

"Do you, Edward…?" she asks warily, seeking reassurance. I smile at her, desperately thinking of a way to change the subject, and coming up a complete blank. Shit.

"You're buying the company," Her whispered voice is full of horror. Fuck. That's not the reaction I expected.

"Not exactly," I murmur.

"You've bought it – SIP – already," she barely breathes, and her face pales. Christ. Do I lie? No. I mustn't lie to her.

"Possibly," I mutter warily. I don't have to tell her the whole truth.

"You have or you haven't?" she demands. I can't avoid this. Man up, Cullen. She'll be fine with this… eventually. Hopefully.

"Have."

"Why?" she whispers, appalled. *I want to protect you.*

"Because I can, Isabella. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe."

"But you said you wouldn't interfere in my career!"

"And I won't." She pulls her hand out of mine and glares at me. Shit.

"Edward…" She stops, searching for the right… expletive, epithet

"What? —Are you mad at me?" I ask. Though I already know the answer.

"Yes, of course I'm mad at you. I mean, what kind of responsible business executive makes decisions based on who they're currently fucking?" She blanches and glances towards Taylor.

I open my mouth to admonish her. How dare she use that kind of language about herself? In front of my staff, for fuck's sake! Instinctively I want to take her across my knee, right now, here in the back of the car… but I know that option's not open to me anymore.

I can't find the right words, and I take a deep breath, trying to hold on to my temper, as I glare She bites her lip and for a moment looks undecided, making my heartbeat spike… then smiles her beautiful broad smile and lets me in. I wave at Taylor. He pulls away from the curb and I follow Bella up the stairs, enjoying the glorious view of her ass.

The gentle sway of her hips as she climbs each step is beyond seductive – more so, I think, because she has no idea she's doing it. I realize her innate sexiness stems from her innocence, her willingness to experiment, and her ability to trust. Fuck… A dark thought crosses my mind: I hope she still trusts me. I may have completely squandered her trust. I have to rebuild it – and rebuild it I shall.

I have pined for this woman since Saturday… she's mine now. I won't blow it again. Her apartment is neat and tidy, but it has an unlived in quality about it. It reminds me of the gallery we were in yesterday, the converted warehouse, all brick and dark wood. The concrete kitchen island is a stark, novel, design statement. I like it.

"Nice place," I mutter.

"Rose's parents bought it for her." Alec Hale has done his daughter proud. It's a neat little condo - he's chosen well. I wonder how Bella feels being beholden to Rose? I know she has little money… it must be tough. She's standing in front of the kitchen island, flushed, watching me closely, her eyes dark. She licks her bottom lip… and my cock quivers.

"Err… would you like a drink?" she asks.

"No thank you, Isabella." *I want you.* She clasps her hands together, seemingly at a loss, looking nervous. Do I still make her nervous?

This girl can bring me to my knees, and she's the one who's nervous.

"What would you like to do, Isabella? I know what I want to do." And we can do it here, or in your bedroom, or your bathroom, I don't care – I just want you. Now. I walk towards her, my eyes not leaving hers. Her lips part as her breathing increases.

You want me to, baby. I know it. I feel it. She backs up against the kitchen island… nowhere else to go.

"I'm still mad at you," she whispers. Not sounding mad at all… wanton, maybe. But not mad.

"I know." I give her my lopsided you-fucking-want-me grin and her eyes widen a fraction. You are mine, baby.

"Would you like something to eat?" she stutters. I nod slowly.

"Yes… you." I stand over her, staring into her beautiful, fathomless dark eyes feeling the heat radiating from her. I want to be wrapped in her heat. Bathed in it. I want to make her scream and moan and call out my name. I want to reclaim her, wipe the memory of our bitter parting. I want to make her mine… again.

But first things first. “Have you eaten today?” I need to know.

“I… had a sandwich at lunch.” Fuck. How can we spend all night making love if she doesn’t have the strength?

“You need to eat.”

“I’m really not hungry right now, err… for food.” I smirk. More innuendo from little Isabella Swan…

“What are you hungry for, Miss Swan?”

“I think you know, Mr Cullen.” I want to groan. She’s not wrong… It’s taking all my self-control not to grab her and toss to the concrete counter. But I was serious when I said she’d have to beg. She has to tell me what she wants, finally vocalize her feelings, her needs, her desires. I need to learn what makes her happy.

I lean down as if to kiss her, fooling her… and whisper in her ear instead.

“Do you want me to kiss you, Isabella?”

“Yes,” Her breath hitches. Fuck. That sound is fucking intoxicating.

“Where?”

“Everywhere.”

“You’re going to have to be a bit more specific than that. I told you I am not going to touch you until you beg me to, and tell me what to do.”

“Please…” she whispers. Oh no, baby. I’m not going to make this easy on you.

“Please what?”

“Touch me.”

“Where, baby?” She reaches up. FUCK. I step back instinctively, blinking, lost. *Don’t touch me!* My heart lurches into my mouth and I have to focus on hiding my fear. Fuck… this is why I have rules.

“No, no,” I scold her mildly, in an effort to disguise my reaction. But the damage is done.

“What?” she says, panic in her eyes.

"No." I shake my head at her. She knows this. I told her this yesterday.

"Not at all?" Her voice is small and pleading. No, baby. No. She steps towards me, and now I don't know what she's going to do. I step back and hold my hands up. I keep my smile glued on my face. I hope it will take the sting out of what I need to say.

"Look, Bella…" *Please. Don't touch me. I don't t like it… I can't handle it.*

"Sometimes you don't mind. Perhaps I should find a marker pen, and we could map out the no go areas," she whispers sadly. Well… that's one approach. Not one that I've considered before.

"That's an idea. Where's your bedroom?" I need to distract her from this subject. She nods to the left.

"Have you been taking your pill?" Her face falls. Oh Fuck…

"No," she squeaks. Christ – after all the trouble we went to, to get her on the fucking pill! I can't believe she just stopped taking it. Stupid little…

Then again, maybe it meant she wasn't interested in sex with anyone else. I am disproportionately pleased by that thought.

"Well, part of me is glad. Not sure which part. Come, let's go and have something to eat." We both need to gather our thoughts. Bed can wait.

"What? I thought we were going to bed. I want to go to bed with you."
"I know, baby. You have the same effect on me that I have on you, Isabella." And believe me, I can't wait to get you into bed… but right now, maybe we should eat and talk.

She looks crestfallen, and I'm absurdly pleased that she does. Ha! She wants to go to bed with me. I bound forward and grab her wrists, pinning her hands behind her and pulling her into my arms. I can feel her down the length of my body. Oh she feels good, slender but good.

"You need to eat – and so do I," I mutter. And you've completely thrown me by trying to touch me. I need to recover my equilibrium, baby.

"Besides… anticipation is the key to seduction, and I'm really into delayed gratification." She gazes at me skeptically. Yes I know… I just made that up.

"I'm seduced and I want my gratification now… I'll beg… please," she murmurs. Fuck, she is Eve herself. So tempting. I hold her close… there's definitely less of her.

It's annoying… she's not been looking after herself. I smile down at her.

"Eat. I can feel how slender you are." I kiss her forehead. She scowls at me and I feel a momentary relief. I like her stubborn and 'defiant.

"I'm still mad that you bought SIP, and now I am mad at you because you're making me wait." She pouts.

"You are one angry little madam aren't you? You'll feel better after a good meal."

"I know what I'll feel better after…"

"Isabella Swan, I'm shocked." Inside I'm dancing. She wants me.

"Stop teasing me. You don't fight fair." I try to repress my grin. Then all of a sudden she pales. Fuck – what now?

"Erm… I could cook something – except we'll have to go shopping."

"Shopping?"

"For groceries."

"You have no food here?" For fuck's sake – no wonder she hasn't eaten! I release her immediately.

"Let's go shopping then,"

I storm to the door of her apartment and open it wide.

We walk two blocks to Ernie's Supermarket. It's small, and packed with too many people – mostly singletons, I judge, from the contents of their shopping baskets. I follow in Bella's wake, enjoying the way her ass sways, all tight and taut in her jeans.

I especially like it when she leans over the vegetable counter and picks up some onions… the fabric stretching across her behind… Oh what I'd like to do to it… She's asked me a question. Fuck. I blink at her.

"When was the last time you were in a supermarket?" Isabella is smirking at me.

"I can't remember."

"Does Mrs Cope do all the shopping?"

“I think Taylor helps her. I’m not sure.”

“Are you happy with a stir-fry? It’s quick.”

“Stir-fry sounds good.” I can’t help but grin. She’s really gagging for it. She’d better have her begging bowl ready.

“Have they worked for you long?” Why the fuck does she want to know about my staff?

“Taylor, four years, I think. Mrs Cope about the same. Why didn’t you have any food in the apartment?” Her eyes are serious all of a sudden.

“You know why,” she murmurs.

“It was you who left me,” I mutter. If you’d stayed I wouldn’t have had the most shit week of my life.

“I know,” she says contritely. I follow her to the checkout and stand in line. Fuck… I hope she doesn’t expect me to do this often. Perhaps I can get Mrs Cope to buy Bella’s groceries too. We could have gone out to eat – there are enough restaurants around here.

“Do you have anything to drink?” I ask.

“Beer, I think.”

“I’ll get some wine.” I head off to find the wine section. It takes me three minutes to deduce that Ernie’s Supermarket does not sell wine. I return to Isabella empty handed.

“There’s a good liquor store next door,” she says.

“I’ll see what they have.” I head out of the store, relieved. Christ – some people do this every day. For a moment I am grateful that Gail saves me from all this shit. Though shopping with Isabella… that makes me smile. She knows what she’s doing, carefully selecting the meat and the vegetables, her little hands prodding and squeezing… it’s a pleasure to watch her.

The liquor store has a woeful selection of wine. I pick a Pinot Grigio from the chill cabinet, pay quickly and leave. Isabella is just coming out of the grocery store.

“Here, let me carry that.” I take both grocery sacks and we walk back to her apartment. She tells me a little about what she’s been doing during the week. She’s obviously enjoying her new job… good. She doesn’t mention my takeover of SIP again, and I’m grateful. Back in

her apartment she gazes at me with ill-concealed amusement – another of her expressions that I have missed the last few days.

"You look very domestic," she says. Her comment takes me by surprise. I quite like being domestic… with her.

"No one has ever accused me of that before." I place the bags on the kitchen island and she sets to work unloading them. I grab the wine. The grocery store was enough reality for today. Now – where would she keep a corkscrew?

"This place is still so new. I think the opener is in that drawer there." She points using her chin. I smile at her, open the drawer and locate the corkscrew. It's gratifying to know that she hasn't been drowning her sorrows in wine during my absence. She blushes… why?

"What are you thinking about?" I ask as I shrug out of my jacket. Slinging it on the couch I saunter back to the waiting bottle of wine.

"How little I know you, really," she says wistfully.

"You know me better than anyone," I murmur. She can certainly read me like no-one else. It's… unsettling. I open the bottle using the same cheesy flourish as that waiter in the restaurant in Portland.

"I don't think that's true," she says as she continues to unpack the bags.

"It is, Isabella. I am a very, very private person." I have to be… doing what I do. Um… what I did. I pour two glasses and hand one to her.

"Cheers." I raise my glass.

"Cheers," she responds, and takes a sip. She starts busying herself in the kitchen, obviously in her element. She looks like she's been doing it for years… I remember her telling me how she used to cook for her Dad. She really is very independent. You knew that, Cullen, deep down. She's a stubborn little thing.

"Can I help you with that?" I ask. She gapes at me as if I've asked her to steal the Crown Jewels.

"No, it's fine… sit."

"I'd like to help." She blinks at me, dismayed.

"You can chop the vegetables," she says eventually. I'd better warn her. What I know about cooking is not worth writing down. Mrs Cope and my submissives – some with more

success than others – have been the only cooks in my life. My Mom tried to engage me when I was in my teens. But it wasn't for me.

"I don't cook," I say, gazing at the razor-sharp knife she hands me.

"I imagine you don't need to." She places a chopping board and some red peppers in front me. What the fuck am I supposed to do with these? They are such a weird shape to cut.

"You've never chopped a vegetable?" Isabella asks, failing to hide the disbelief in her voice.

"No." She smirks at me as if I'm a moron.

"Are you smirking at me?"

"Well, it appears this is something that I can do and you cant. Let's face it Edward, I think this is a first. Here – I'll show you." She brushes past me and my body wakes. Fuck.

"Like this," she says as she slices up the red pepper and neatly removes all the seeds and shit from the inside.

"Looks simple enough," I grumble.

"You shouldn't have any trouble with it." Her tone is ironic. Does she not think I'm capable of cutting up a fucking vegetable? I'll show her. Very carefully I start to slice. Fuck, these seeds get everywhere… it's more difficult than I thought. She made it look easy. She pushes past me, her thigh brushing against my leg. It's distracting, but I continue to slice carefully – this blade is evil.

She moves past me again, this time brushing her hip against me… then again, another touch, and all below my waist. It's very diverting.

"I know what you're doing, Isabella," I murmur darkly.

"I think it's called cooking," she says brightly, innocently… disingenuously. Is she finally realizing the power she has over me? Grabbing another knife she joins me at the chopping board, peeling and slicing garlic, shallots, and French beans. She uses any excuse to bump into me.

"You're quite good at this," I mutter as I start on my second pepper.

"Chopping?" She bats her eyelashes at me theatrically.

“Years of practice.” She brushes up against me once more, with her behind. My cock approves, big time. She takes the vegetables and places them beside the gently smoking wok.

“If you do that again Isabella, I am going to take you on the kitchen floor.”

“You’ll have to beg me first,” she says, gazing round at me. Her eyes are full of desire… Fuck.

“Is that a challenge?”

“Maybe.”

Oh, Miss Swan. Bring it on. I put down the knife and saunter slowly over to her, not taking my eyes off her. Her eyes get bigger and her lips part as she takes a sharp breath. I lean past her, an inch away, but don’t touch her, and I switch off the gas for the wok.

“I think we’ll eat later,” I murmur… because right now, I am going fuck your brains out.

“Put the chicken in the fridge.” She swallows, picks up the bowl of diced chicken, rather clumsily places a plate over the top and puts the whole thing in the fridge. I step up behind her silently so that when she turns I’m right in front of her.

“So you’re going to beg?” she whispers.

“No Isabella.” I shake my head,

“No begging.” I gaze down at her, lust and need thickening my blood. Fuck, I want to be buried in her. I watch as her eyes widen and her cheeks flush with desire. She wants me. I want her. She bites her lip… and I can bear it no more.

Grabbing her hips I pull her against my hardening erection. Her hands are in my hair and she’s pulling me down to her mouth. I push her against the fridge and kiss her hard. She tastes so good. So sweet. She moans into my mouth and it’s like a wake-up call for my body that makes me harder still. I move my hand into her hair, pulling her head back so I can angle my tongue deeper into her mouth. Her tongue wrestles with mine… fuck – it’s erotic, raw, intense. I pull back.

“What do you want, Isabella?”

“You.”

“Where?”

"Bed." I need no other prompt. I release her, scoop her into my arms, and carry her quickly into her bedroom. I need her naked and wanting underneath me. Putting her gently on the floor I quickly switch on her bedside light and draw her curtains.

As I glance quickly down to the street below, I realise this is indeed the room I stared at, during my silent vigils, from my stalker's hide. When I turn she's standing watching me. Wide-eyed. Waiting. Wanting.

"Now what?" I ask. She flushes.

"Make love to me," she says after a beat.

"How? You have got to tell me, baby." She licks her lips nervously and lust surges through me. Shit – focus, Cullen.

"Undress me," she says. Finally! I hook my index finger into the top of her blouse, careful not to touch her soft skin, and tug gently, forcing her to step towards me.

"Good girl," I murmur. I can see the rise and fall of her breasts as her breathing quickens. I gaze into her dark eyes, my own full of carnal promise I'm sure, hers wide with longing and need. Just like I need her.

Deftly I start to unbutton her blouse. She puts her hands on my arms, to steady herself I think, and gazes up at me. Yeah, that's fine, baby. Don't touch my chest. I undo the last button, pull the blouse off her shoulders and let it fall to the floor. Making a very conscious effort not to touch her beautiful breasts I reach down to the waistband of her jeans. I undo the top button and pull down the zipper.

"Tell me what you want, Isabella." I resist the urge to throw her on the bed and plow into her. This is going to be a waiting game. She needs to talk to me.

"Kiss me from here to here," she whispers, trailing her finger from the base of her ear down her throat.

My pleasure, Miss Swan. Smoothing her hair out of the way I gather her soft tresses in my hand and pull her head gently to the side, exposing her slender, long neck. I lean in and nuzzle her ear and she squirms deliciously, as I trail soft kisses following the path of her finger, and back again. She makes a soft noise in the back of her throat… it's arousing. I want to lose myself in her. Rediscover her.

"My jeans… and panties," she murmurs, and I can't help my grin against her throat. She's getting the idea. Finally… talk to me, Bella. I kiss her throat one final time, then drop to my knees in front of her, taking her by surprise. I hook my thumbs into the waistband of her jeans and her panties and gently pull them down. Sitting back on my knees I gaze up her

beauty as she steps out of her pumps and her clothes. Her eyes meet mine, and I await my command.

“What now, Isabella?”

“Kiss me,” she whispers, her voice barely audible.

“Where?”

“You know where.” I resist my smile… she really can’t say the word.

“Where?” I tease. She flushes again and with a determined, though embarrassed expression, she quickly points to the apex of her thighs.

“Oh, with pleasure,” I chuckle, enjoying her embarrassment, grinning. Slowly I let my fingers travel up her legs until my hands are at her hips, then pull her sharply forward, on to my mouth. Fuck… I can smell her arousal. I’m already uncomfortable in my jeans… shit, they just got a size or three smaller.

I push my tongue through her pubic hair, wondering briefly if I’ll ever persuade her to get rid of this… and I find my goal, tasting her. Christ she’s sweet. So fucking sweet. She groans and fists her fingers in my hair and I don’t stop. Swirling my tongue, round and round, teasing and testing her.

“Edward, please,” she pleads. I stop briefly.

“Please what, Isabella?”

“Make love to me.”

“I am,” I breathe, and blow gently on her clitoris.

“No. I want you inside me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Please…”

No… I’m having too much fun. I continue the slow lascivious torture of my sweet precious girl.

“Edward – Please!” she moans loudly. I release her and stand, my mouth wet from me and her, and gaze down at her through hooded eyes.

"Well?" I ask.

"Well what?" she pants.

"I'm still dressed." She gapes at me, not understanding, and I hold my arms out in surrender. Take me – I'm yours. She reaches for my shirt. Shit. No. I step back.

"Oh no…" I murmur softly. I mean my jeans, baby. She blinks as the penny drops and suddenly falls to her knees. Whoa! Bella… what are you doing? And rather clumsily – the usual fingers and thumbs – she undoes my waistband and flies, and tugs quickly down. Fuck. Finally my cock has some room to breathe.

I gaze down at her, in her submissive position on the floor. What is she trying to do to me? As she glances up I quickly step out of my clothes and remove my socks. She reaches up and grabs my cock. Fuck. Squeezing tightly… like I've shown her.

She pushes her hand back… oh… almost too far. Almost painfully. But just the sight of her and the feel of her small hand around my favorite organ is nearly too much. I groan and tense, and close my eyes, then feel her warm, wet mouth around me. She sucks hard.

"Ahh… Bella … whoa, gently." As I cup her head she pushes me deeper into her mouth, her lips sheathing her teeth, pressing down on me.

"Fuck," I hiss in veneration, and involuntarily I flex my hips towards her. That feels so good. She does it again and again, and it's beyond arousing. She swirls her tongue round the end… again and again… teasing me.

She's all tit for tat today. I groan loudly, reveling in the feel of her adept mouth and tongue. Christ… she's too good at this. She takes me deep into her mouth again. Fuck…

"Bella, that's enough. No more, please," I breathe through gritted teeth. She's unraveling my control. I do not want to come now – I want to be inside her when I explode. She does it again and again. Fucking tease.

"Bella, you've made your point. I do not want to come in your mouth." I grunt. And still she ignores me. Fuck. Enough, woman!

Grasping her shoulders I pull her to her feet, lift her quickly and toss her on to her bed. I reach down into my jeans pocket, pull out a condom, drag my shirt off over my head and throw it onto the floor. She's lying sprawled and wanton on the bed.

"Take your bra off," I command. She sits up and hurriedly does as she's told, for once.

"Lie down. I want to look at you." She lies back on her sheets, gazing at me. Fuck, she's lovely. I rip the foil packet open and roll on the rubber. She watches my every move, still panting. Her hair is splayed out in a luscious chestnut halo around her face. Her body is flushed a delicate pink with arousal… her nipples are hard, calling to me… her long legs are parted. Waiting for me.

"You are a fine sight, Isabella Swan." *And you're mine. Again.* Crawling up the bed, I kiss her ankles, the inside of her knees, her hip, her soft belly, my tongue swirling around her navel… she moans. I lick the underside of one breast, then the other. Then I take her nipple in my mouth, teasing it, elongating it as it hardens between my lips. I pull hard, and she writhes brazenly beneath me. *Patience baby…* Releasing that nipple I lavish my attention on its twin.

"Edward, please…" she begs.

"Please what?" I murmur between her breasts, savoring her need.

"I want you inside me."

"Do you now?"

"Yes… please." She's all breathy and desperate. Just how I like her. I push her legs apart with my knees. *Oh, I want you too baby.* I hover over her, poised and ready. I want to savor this moment, this moment when I reclaim her beautiful body, reclaim my beautiful girl. Her dark eyes burn up at me and very slowly I sink into her. Fuck… she feels so good, so right, so tight.

She tilts her pelvis up to meet me, throws her head back, her chin in the air, her mouth open in soundless adulation. She grasps my upper arms, groaning loudly. What a sweet sound it is. I put my hands around her head to hold her in place, ease out of her then slide into her again.

Her fingers move to my hair, pulling at me, and I move slowly, feeling her burning warmth around me, relishing every single fucking inch of her.

"Faster, Edward, faster… please," she begs. Her eyes are wide, her mouth slack… she looks fucking gorgeous. My mouth finds hers, claiming that too, and I start to move, really move.

Your wish is my command baby. I push and push… she's so sweet. I've missed this. Missed everything about her. I lose myself in her, burying myself in her over and over again. She feels like home. She's everything. I can feel her building around me, reaching her peak. Oh, baby yes… Her legs start to tense. She's close. So am I.

“Come on, baby. Give it to me,” I whisper through my gritted teeth.

She cries out as she detonates around me, clenching and pulling on me deep inside, and I explode… pouring my life and soul into her again and again.

“Bella! Oh Fuck – Bella!”

I collapse on her, pressing her into the mattress, and bury my face in her neck… inhaling her delicious, intoxicating fragrance. She’s mine once more. No one will take her away from me.

I realize in this moment of bliss that I shall do everything in my power to keep her.

Keep her mine

Outtake 5: Irina Confrontation

BPOV

Edward is standing in the doorway. It takes him a nanosecond to assess the situation – me ashen and shaking, her soaked and livid. His lovely face darkens and contorts with anger as he comes to stand between us.

"What the fuck are you doing, Irina?" he says, his voice glacial and laced with menace. She blinks up at him.

"She's not right for you, Edward," she whispers.

"*What?"* he shouts, startling both of us. I can't see his face but his whole body has tensed, and radiates animosity.

"How the *fuck* do you know what's right for me?"

"You have needs, Edward," she pleads.

"I've told you before – this is none of your fucking business" he roars.

Oh crap - Very Angry Edward has reared his not-so-ugly head. People are going to hear.

"What is this?" He pauses, glaring at her. "Do you think it's you? *You?* You think you're right for me?" His voice is softer, but drips contempt, and suddenly I don't want to be here. I don't want to witness this intimate encounter… I'm intruding. But I'm stuck – my limbs unwilling to move.

Irina swallows, and seems to draw herself upright. Her stance changes subtly, becomes more commanding, and she steps towards him.

"I was the best thing that ever happened to you" she hisses arrogantly at him. "Look at you now – one of the richest, most successful, entrepreneurs in the US – controlled, driven – you need nothing. You are master of your universe."

He steps back as if he's been struck, and I can see his expression. He gapes at her in outraged disbelief.

"You loved it, Edward – don't try and kid yourself. You were on the road to self-destruction, and I saved you from that – saved you from a life behind bars. Believe me

baby, that‘s where you would have ended up. I taught you everything you know – everything you need.”

Edward blanches, staring at her in horror. When he speaks his voice is low and incredulous.

“You taught me how to fuck, Irina. But it‘s empty, like you. No wonder Linc left.”

Bile rises into my mouth. I should not be here. But I‘m frozen to the spot, morbidly fascinated, as they eviscerate each other.

“You never once held me,” Edward whispers. “You never once said you loved me.”

She narrows her eyes.

“Love is for fools, Edward.” And she reaches up to grasp his arm, her gesture beyond patronizing.

“Get out of my house,” Esme breathes.

Three pair of eyes swing rapidly to where Esme stands, on the threshold of the room. She is glaring at Irina, who pales beneath her St Tropez tan.

Time seems suspended, as we collectively take a deep gasping breath, and Esme stalks deliberately into the room. Her eyes blaze with fury, never once leaving Irina, until she stands before her. Irina‘s eyes widen in alarm – and Esme slaps her hard across the face, the sound of the impact resounding off the walls of the dining room.

“Take your filthy paws off my son, you whore, and get out of my house – now!” she hisses through gritted teeth.

Irina clutches her reddening cheek, and stares in horror for a moment, shocked and blinking at Esme. Then she hurries from the room, not bothering to close the door behind her.

Esme turns slowly to face Edward and a tense silence settles like a thick blanket over us. Edward and Esme, staring at each other. After a beat, Esme speaks.

“Bella, before I hand him over to you, would you mind giving me a minute or two alone with my son?” Her voice is quiet, husky, but oh-so-strong.

“Of course,” I whisper.

EPOV

Out of the corner of my eye I watch Bella leave and close the door. Mom glowers at me, saying nothing, looking at me as though she's seeing me for the first time. Seeing the monster she reared but did not create. Fuck… I'm in big trouble. My scalp prickles in acknowledgement and I feel the blood drain from my face.

"How long, Edward?" she says eventually, her voice soft. And I know that tone – it's the calm before the storm. Shit. How much did she hear?

"A few years," I mumble. I don't want her to know. I don't want to tell her. I don't want to hurt her… I know it will. I've known that since I was fifteen.

"How old were you?"

I swallow and my heart rate accelerates like a Formula One engine. I have to be careful here.

I don't want to cause trouble for Irina. I gaze at Mom, trying to judge how she'll react.

Should I lie to her? Could I lie to her? And part of me knows I lied to her every time I saw Irina and told her I was studying with a friend.

Mom's eyes widen and she pales.

"Tell me. How old were you when this all started?" she says through gritted teeth.

It's the voice that I've only heard on rare occasions, and I know I'm doomed. She will not stop until she has an answer.

"Sixteen," I whisper.

She narrows her eyes and cocks her head to one side.

"Try again," she whispers, her voice chillingly quiet.

Fuck… how does she know?

"Edward," she warns, prompting me.

"Fifteen…"

She closes her eyes like I've stabbed her, her hand flying to her mouth as she stifles a sob.

When she opens her eyes, they are filled with pain… and tears slowly well in them. Oh shit.

"Mom…" I try and think of something to say to take that pain away. I step towards her and she holds up her hand up to stop me.

"Edward. I am so mad at you right now. I suggest you don't come any closer."

She's threatening me with violence. Fuck, if only she knew…

"How did you know? That I lied," I ask.

"For heaven's sake, Edward – I'm your mother," she snaps irritably as she dashes a fallen tear from her cheek.

I think I actually blush, feeling stupid and slightly piqued at the same time. Only my Mom can make me feel this way – my Mom, and now Bella. Shit, I thought I could lie well.

I am so much better at it than Bella. She really is crap at lying.

"Yes, you should look shame-faced. How long? How long did you lie to us, Edward?"

Oh, she's going for the guilt angle. I shrug. I don't want her to know.

"Tell me!" she snaps.

"A few years."

"Years! Years!" she shouts, making me cringe. She so rarely shouts.

"I can't believe it… that *fucking* woman."

I gasp. I have never heard Mom swear. Ever. It shocks me to the core.

She turns and paces to the window. I stay standing. Paralyzed. Shocked. *Mom just swore.*

"And to think, all the times she's been here…" Mom groans loudly and puts her head in her hands. I cannot stand by any longer. I step towards her and wrap my arms around her.

This is so new to me too… holding my Mom. I pull her to my chest, and she starts to weep quietly.

"I've already thought you dead this week, and now this…"

"Mom – It's not what you think."

“Don’t even try it, Edward. I heard you, I heard what you said. That she taught you to fuck.”

She’s said it again. I flinch – this isn’t her… she doesn’t swear. It’s mortifying to think I have something to do with this. I would never want to hurt Esme. She saved me. In this moment remorse and penitence flood through me.

“I knew something happened when you were fifteen. She was the reason, wasn’t she? The reason you suddenly calmed down, seemed to focus? Oh Edward… what did she do to you?” she sniffs.

Mom! Why is she over-reacting? Do I tell her that Irina brought me under control? I don’t have to tell her how.

“Yes,” I murmur.

She groans again.

“Oh, Edward. I’ve gotten drunk with that woman, spilled my soul to her so many nights… and to think…”

“My relationship with her has nothing to do with you two.”

“Don’t give me that bullshit, Edward! She abused my trust. She abused my son!”

Her voice cracks, and once more she buries her face in her hands.

“Mom – it didn’t feel like that.”

She stands back and swats me round the head, making me duck.

“Words fail me, Edward. Fail me. Where did I go wrong?”

“Mom, its nothing to do with you!”

“How? How did it start?” She holds her hand up and continues hurriedly, —I don’t want to know that… What will your father say?”

Shit… Carlisle will go ape. Suddenly I’m fifteen again, dreading another of his interminable lectures on personal responsibility, acceptable behavior and the all-American way. Christ, that’s the last thing I want.

"Yes, he'll be mad as hell," Mom snaps, correctly interpreting my expression. "We knew something had happened. You changed overnight – and to think it was because you got laid by my best friend."

Right now I want the floor to swallow me up.

"Mom – it's been, it's done, it's gone. She did me no harm. I think she was a force for good."

"Edward, I heard what you said. You told her she never loved you. Never held you. I heard her cold response… and to think…" She puts her head in her hands once more.

Suddenly her eyes fly up to meet mine, and widen in horror. Fuck… what now? "No!" she breathes.

"What?"

"Oh no. Tell me it's not true, because I'll find your father's old pistol and I'll shoot the bitch."

Fuck… *Mom!*

"What?"

"I know that Irina's tastes run to the exotic, Edward."

For the second time this evening I feel slightly dizzy. Shit… She must not know this.

"It was just sex, Mom," I mutter quickly – let_s shut that down right now. No way am I exposing my mother to that part of my life.

She narrows her eyes at me. "I don't want the sordid details, Edward. Because that's what this is… nasty, sordid, squalid. What kind of woman does that to a fifteen-year-old boy? It's disgusting. She should come with a health warning… Jesus! To think of the things I've told that bitch. Well – you can be sure she_'l never be welcome here again." She presses her lips together in determination. "And you should cease all contact with her."

"Mom, um… Irina and I run a very successful business together."

"No, Edward. You cut your ties with her."

I stare at her, speechless. How can she tell me what to do? I am twenty-eight years old for fuck_s sake.

"Mom…"

"No Edward – I'm serious. If you don't, I will go to the police."

I pale.

"You wouldn't."

"I will. I couldn't stop it then, but I can now."

"You're just real mad, Mom, and I don_t blame you – but you_re over-reacting."

"DON'T TELL ME I'M OVER-REACTING," she yells. Shit! "You are *not* going to have any kind of relationship with someone who can abuse a troubled, immature, child!"

She's glowering at me. Christ!

"Okay…" I hold my hands up defensively and she seems to calm.

"Does Bella know?"

"Yes, she does."

"Good. You shouldn't start your married life with secrets." She frowns slightly… as if she's speaking from personal experience. Vaguely I wonder what that's about.

She recovers herself.

"I'd be interested to hear what she thinks of Irina."

"She's kind of in your camp."

"Sensible girl. You've fallen on your feet with her, at least. A lovely young woman who's the right age. Someone you can find happiness with."

My expression softens. Yes. She makes me happier than I ever thought I could feel.

"You are to end it with Irina. Cut all ties. You understand?"

"Yes Mom. I'd planned to do that as a wedding present to Isabella."

"What? Well, you'd better think of something else! That's hardly romantic, Edward," she scoffs.

Oh!

“I thought she’d like that.”

“Honestly, men! You have no idea sometimes.”

“What do you think I should give her?”

“Oh, Edward,” she sighs… then smiles at me, a small wan smile. “You really haven’t taken in a word have you? Do you know why I’m upset?”

“Yes, of course.” Shit… I nearly had her then.

“Tell me, then.” I gaze at her and sigh. “I don’t know, Mom. Because you didn’t know? Because she’s your friend?”

She reaches up and gently strokes my hair, like she used to, when I was small.

“For all those reasons… and because she obviously didn’t love you. She abused you, darling. And you are so deserving of love.” Fuck. I can feel a pricking at the back of my eyes.

“Mom…” I whisper.

She puts her arms around me, calmer now, and I hug her in return.

“You’d better go find your bride to be. I shall tell your father when the party’s over. No doubt he’ll want to talk to you too.”

“Sure, Mom.” Oh shit… I want to avoid Carlisle at all costs. I can just imagine what he’ll say.

“I’m still mad at you. But madder at her…” Her face loses all trace of humor. I’d never realized how scary Esme can be when she wants.

“I know,” I murmur.

“Go on… off you go. Find your girl.” She releases me, steps back and rubs her fingers under her eyes to wipe away her smudged make-up. She looks beautiful. This wonderful woman, who truly loves me… like I love her.

I take a deep breath.

“I didn’t mean to hurt you, Mom.”

“I know. Go.”

I nod, and lean down, and gently kiss her forehead, surprising her. I head out of the room to find Bella.

Outtake 6: Fifty's First Christmas

My sweater is scratchy and smells of new. Everything is new. I have a new Mommy. She is kind and smiles. She smiles all the time. Her teeth are small and white.

"Do you want to help me decorate the tree, Edward?"

There is a big tree in the room with the big couches. A big tree. I have seen these before. But in stores. Not inside where the couches are. My new house has lots of couches. Not one couch. Not one brown sticky couch.

"Here, look."

My new Mommy shows me a box and it's full of balls. Lots of pretty shiny balls.

"These are ornaments for the tree."

Orn-a-ments. Orn-a-ments. My head says the word. Orn-a-ments.

"And these…" She stops and pulls out a string with little flowers on them.

"These are the lights. Lights first, and then we can trim the tree." She reaches down and puts her fingers in my hair. I go very still. But I like her fingers in my hair. I like to be near new Mommy. She smells good. Clean. And she only touches my hair.

"MOM!"

He's calling. Memet. He's big and loud. Very loud. He talks. All the time. I don't talk at all. I have no words. I have words in my head.

"Emmett Darling. We're in the sitting room."

He runs in. He has been to school. He has a picture. A picture he has drawn for my New Mommy. She is Memet's Mommy too. She kneels down and hugs him and looks at the picture. It is a house with a mommy and a daddy and a Memet and an Edward. Edward is very small in Memet's picture. Memet is big.

He has a big smile and Edward has a sad face.

Doctor Daddy is here too. He walks towards Mommy. I hold my blanky tight. He kisses New Mommy and New Mommy isn't frightened. She smiles. She kisses him back. I squeeze my blanky.

"Hello Edward." Doctor Daddy has a deep soft voice. I like his voice. He is never loud. He does not shout. He does not shout like… He reads books to me when I go to bed. He reads about a cat and a hat and green eggs and ham. I have never seen green eggs. Doctor Daddy bends down so he is small.

"What did you do today?"

I show him the tree.

"You bought a tree? A Christmas tree?"

I say yes with my head.

"It's a beautiful tree. You and Mommy chose very well. It's an important job choosing the right tree."

He pats my hair too and I go very still and hold my blanky tightly. Doctor Daddy doesn't hurt me.

"Daddy, look at my picture." Memet is mad when Doctor Daddy talks to me. Memet is mad with me. I smack Memet when he is mad with me. New Mommy is mad with me if I do. Memet does not smack me. Memet is scared of me.

The lights on the tree are pretty.

"Here, let me show you. The hook goes through the little eye and then you can hang it on the tree." Mommy puts the red orn-a… orn-a-ment on the tree.

"You try, with this little bell."

The little bell rings. I shake it. The sound is a happy sound. I shake it again.

Mommy smiles. A big smile. A special smile for me.

"You like the bell, Edward?"

I say yes with my head and shake the bell once more and it tinkles happily.

"You have a lovely smile, darling boy." Mommy blinks and quickly wipes her hand over her eyes and she strokes my hair.

“I love to see your smile.” Her hand moves to my shoulder. No. I step back and squeeze my blanky. Mommy looks sad and then happy. She strokes my hair.

“Shall we put the bell on the tree?”

My head says yes.

“Edward, you must tell me when you’re hungry. You can do that. You can take Mommy’s hand and lead Mommy to the kitchen and point.” She points her long finger at me. Her nail is shiny and pink. It is pretty. But I don’t know if my New Mommy is mad or not. I have finished all my dinner. Macaroni and cheese. It tastes good.

“I don’t want you to be hungry, darling. Okay? Now would you like some ice-cream?”

My head says YES!

Mommy smiles at me. I like her smiles. They are better than macaroni and cheese.

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The tree is pretty. I stand and look at it and hug my blanky. The lights twinkle and are all different colors and the orn-a-ments are all different colors. I like the blue ones. And on the top of the tree is a big star. Doctor Daddy held Memet up and Memet put the star on the tree. Memet likes putting the star on the tree. I want to put the star on the tree… but I don’t want Doctor Daddy to hold me up high. I don’t want him to hold me. The star is sparkly and bright.

Beside the tree is the piano. My New Mommy lets me touch the black and the white on the piano. Black and white. I like the white sounds. The black sound is wrong. But I like the black sound too. I go white to black. White to black. Black to white. White, white, white, white. Black, black, black, black. I like the sound. I really like the sound.

“Do you want me to play for you, Edward?”

My New Mommy sits down. She touches the white and the black and the songs come. She presses the pedals underneath. Sometimes it’s loud and sometimes it’s quiet. The song is happy. Memet likes Mommy to sing too.

New Mommy sings.

There once was an ugly duckling
With feathers all stubby and brown
And the other birds said in so many words
Quack, Quack
Get out of town
Quack Quack
Get out
Quack Quack
Get out
Quack Quack
Get out of town

Mommy makes a funny quacking noise. Memet makes the funny quacking noise and he makes his arms like wings and flaps them up and down like a bird. Memet is funny.

Mommy laughs. Memet laughs. I laugh.

"You like this song, Edward?" And New Mommy has her sad-happy face.

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I have a stock-ing. It is red and it has a picture of a man with a red hat and a big white beard. He is Santa. Santa brings presents. I have seen pictures of Santa.

But Santa never bought me presents before. I was bad. Santa doesn't bring presents to boys who are bad. Now I am good. My New Mommy says I am good, very good. New Mommy doesn't know. I must never tell New Mommy… but I am bad. I don't want New Mommy to know that.

Doctor Daddy hangs the stock-ing over the fireplace. Memet has a stocking too. Memet can read the word on his stock-ing. It says Memet. There is a word on my stock-ing. Edward. New Mommy spells it out.

E

D

W

A

R

D

Doctor Daddy sits on my bed. He reads to me. I hold my blanky. I have a big room. Sometimes the room is dark and I have bad dreams. Bad dreams about before. My New Mommy comes to bed with me when I have the bad dreams. She lies down and she sings soft songs and I go to sleep. She smells of soft and new and lovely. My New Mommy is not cold. Not like… not like… And my bad dreams go when she is there asleep with me.

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Santa has been. Santa does not know I have been bad. I am glad Santa does not know.

I have a train and a plane, and a helicopter, and a car and a helicopter. My helicopter can fly. My helicopter is blue. It flies round the Christmas tree. If flies over the piano and lands in the middle of the white. It flies over Mommy and flies over Daddy and flies over Memet as he plays with the Lego.

The helicopter flies through the house, through the dining room, through the kitchen. He flies past the door to Daddy's study and upstairs in my bedroom, in Memet's bedroom, Mommy and Daddy's bedroom. He flies through the house, because it's my house. My house, where I live.